

Forgiveness: A Practice for Living a Compassionate Life

A Professional Project

presented to

the Faculty of

Claremont School of Theology

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Ministry

by

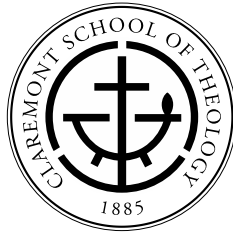
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May 2019

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has been presented to and accepted by the
faculty of Claremont School of Theology in
partial fulfillment of the requirements of the

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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May 2019

Abstract

The twentieth century was the deadliest in human history. Two world wars and a multitude of regional conflicts have pitted one group of people against another with disastrous results. Getting even and revenge continue the violence and bloodshed. Getting even and revenge are labeled justice as the need to make sure people pay takes precedence over finding peace. Forgiveness offers an alternative to paying back the offense with revenge and more violence.

This project is undertaken to explore the topic of forgiveness from a practical perspective. The case will be argued that Christians need to take the practice of forgiveness more seriously and make the decision to forgive and then enter a process to forgive. There are theological and health reasons to forgive, and the benefits of knowing that we are following Jesus' commandments and improving our health give us evidence to practice forgiveness. The benefits of releasing the pain of a hurt allow us to live compassionately and fully, and the benefits extend to those in our family, friends, and community.

Currently, there is no standardized definition of forgiveness. Over the years as I have preached on forgiveness and helped individuals with forgiveness, I have developed my own definition of forgiveness. The definition of forgiveness that I have adopted and is used in this project is: *Forgiveness is the elimination of all desire for revenge and personal ill will toward those who have wronged us. Forgiveness is an inner peace of heart and the freedom of not having our lives defined by the injuries we have suffered.*

While forgiveness is the alternative, the decision to forgive and the practice of forgiveness are difficult and hard work. There is great interest in forgiveness and the numerous books, websites, articles, and other media support this interest. Some of these sources approach forgiveness from a religious perspective. Other sources approach forgiveness from a science and

health perspective. Some sources offer quick solutions to forgiveness, and others suggest research that still needs to be completed about forgiveness.

This project is partially autobiographical. My story of deciding to forgive and learning how to forgive is woven through the chapters in this project. I was wounded as a child and that hurt affected my thoughts, decisions, and behavior as an early adult. I made the decision to forgive and with much prayer and the help of therapists and friends, forgiveness healed those wounds, and gave me a practice to use in my daily life.

This project includes a small group study focused on understanding what forgiveness is and a method for how to forgive. People learn best through active involvement with information and this small group study promotes learning how to forgive through each person's own life.

When we make the decision to forgive and learn to forgive, we release the pain in our lives, and live in the present and future. We also learn that we don't have a single occasion to forgive; forgiveness is a life time practice. Forgiveness is difficult work and is worth the effort.

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Introduction

In one of his stories, Ernest Hemingway tells about a young man who wrongs his father and he runs away from home to the city of Madrid. Out of great love for his son, the father takes out an ad in the Madrid newspaper, “Paco, meet me Hotel Montana, 12 noon Tuesday. All is forgiven. Papa.”¹ Now Paco is a rather common name in Spain, and so when the father gets to the hotel, he finds eight hundred young men waiting for their fathers. 800 men showed up who wanted to be forgiven.

To the 800 men who showed up forgiveness was important. They wanted to be forgiven and the relationship with their fathers restored. I believe that is not only true for these 800 men. We all have a longing to be forgiven. We all want our relationships to be harmonious and forgiveness is critical to living harmonious. Forgiveness is a critical element in our lives, both being forgiven when something has gone wrong, and to forgive others when we have been hurt or wounded.

All around us our culture tells us that instead of forgiving we should get even and make sure we get justice when we are wronged. Movies and video games we play model heroes taking revenge with violence to get even. Our culture defines winning and being successful as beating the competition. We are supposed to be winners and the competition is the loser.

In addition, when something bad happens and we are hurt, we typically want to find someone to blame. Blaming someone else can relieve us of responsibility and can justify our actions in response. The approach of blaming and getting even may give us short term satisfaction, but most times this allows our hurts to grow and to control what we think, say, and do. In the long term we don’t have peace and we don’t heal from the hurts we have.

¹ Ernest Hemingway, “The Capitol of the World,” in *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 29.

Forgiveness is counter cultural to getting revenge, to blaming others, and to allowing ourselves to being controlled by the hurts and wounds we have. The story from Ernest Hemingway reminds us of the longing we have for forgiveness and for relationships to be restored. It takes courage and strength to name your hurts, examine those hurts, and then release the hurts we are feeling. Forgiveness offers us a path to having compassion for ourselves and others.

Through the years religious leaders and others have called for love and compassion for the world to counteract the violence and war that have taken millions of lives. Forgiveness is essential to answering the call for love and compassion in the world. Practicing forgiveness allows us to consider the other person and the experiences they have had in addition to looking at our own hurts and wounds. Forgiveness changes our interactions with others, and our spiritual and emotional outlook on life.

Historical religious leaders and religious leaders of today teach that our faith tells us to forgive. As Christians we begin by understanding Jesus' commandment to forgive as God as forgiven us. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, declares in his sermon "The Scripture Way of Salvation" that justifying grace is the forgiveness of all our sins.² Through Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, we are forgiven and restored to relationship with God. More recently C.S. Lewis writes that we are to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in us.³ Today every United Methodist Church pastor that I know has preached a sermon series on forgiveness. As Christians we know that Jesus Christ calls for us to forgive not just once but many times, and when we think we have forgiven enough, Jesus Christ would call

² Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology* (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1991), 372-380.

³ C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 181-183.

us to forgive again. Other non-religious leaders, such as well-known researchers Everett Worthington and Fred Luskin, see that forgiveness benefits our physical, mental and emotional health in addition to our spiritual health.

Even though we are called to forgive, forgiveness is always a choice. We can decide to forgive, or we can decide to not forgive, or we can decide that we want to forgive, but we are not ready to begin the forgiveness process. If and when we decide to forgive, the work to forgive can be difficult. Even though forgiveness can be difficult, we see examples of people with horrendous tragedies who have forgiven. For example, the Amish who practiced forgiveness to the man who killed 5 school girls, or some of the people who lost a loved one on 9/11, or Elle Weisel forgiving the German people for the dreadful Holocaust.⁴ We see people in our own lives who have forgiven; the driver who seriously injured a loved one, or the person down the street who forgave the person who torched their home, We admire these people and wonder how these people are able to forgive. We call the people who can forgive under these terrible circumstances *saints*. Sometimes we believe we could never do the same. While it might be a challenge, we are able to forgive because we are created by God with love and compassion at our core. It is with God's help that we can forgive.

Most times our situations calling for forgiveness aren't at the same level of tragedy as these examples. Even when the hurts and wounds are less serious than the examples above, we still must make the choice to forgive and work through the process of forgiveness. The choice to withhold forgiveness has a negative effect on our spiritual life as well as our physical, mental, and emotional health.

⁴ *The Power of Forgiveness*, directed by Martin Doblmeier, (New York, NY: First Run Features, 2017), DVD.

Practicing forgiveness has importance for individuals, for the communities that surround us, and for the global world. When we learn as individuals to forgive, it benefits us, and the ripple effects extend beyond ourselves to our families, friends, and communities.

If we are called to practice forgiveness and we believe it is good for our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health, then why don't we practice forgiveness more frequently? Sometimes we tell ourselves that the event we experienced was unforgiveable. Sometimes we tell ourselves that we need justice and justice is incompatible with forgiveness. Sometimes we feel that revenge and getting even will give us more satisfaction. Sometimes we would like to forgive but we don't know how to forgive. All of these reasons for not forgiving are misunderstandings of what forgiveness is and/or a lack of knowledge on how to forgive.

Research Statement

This project is undertaken to explore the topic of forgiveness from a practical perspective. The case will be argued that Christians need to take the practice of forgiveness more seriously. It is argued that individuals make the decision to forgive and then enter a process (included in this project) to forgive. There are theological and health reasons to forgive. The benefits of knowing that we are following Jesus' commandment to forgive and improving our health give us evidence to practice forgiveness. The benefits of releasing the pain of a hurt allow us to live compassionately and fully, and the benefits extend to those in our family, friends, and community.

Outline of the Paper

As a pastor I look at what God requires of us and how to translate what God requires into concrete thoughts, words, and deeds that individuals can practice. There are several ways to look at what God requires. In the Hebrew Bible Micah 6:8 (NRSV) tells us what God requires of us:

to do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with God. When Jesus was asked by the lawyer what are the greatest commandments Jesus replied, the first commandment is to love God with our whole being and the second commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves.⁵ Loving kindness or loving our neighbor necessitates forgiving in order to love.

In the case of forgiveness, I have seen Christians admit that we are called to forgive, but don't practice forgiveness on a regular basis. We have heard the message of forgiveness in our churches through sermons or group studies, but we don't take the message seriously or know how to forgive. We hear the words, but don't put those words into action in our daily lives. The hope of this project is to present the case for taking forgiveness seriously, and learning the practice of forgiveness to implement in our lives and thus benefit from the changes in our lives.

This look at forgiveness will begin with defining forgiveness, including what forgiveness is and what forgiveness is not. There currently is no standardized definition for forgiveness. There are several reasons why there are no standardized definitions. One of the main reasons is because the way religious settings look at forgiveness is different than how forgiveness is used in neurobiology studies. In religious settings the focus is on the relationship with God and our relationships with our fellow humankind. Forgiveness is a virtue to be practiced. In scientific settings measurements are necessary to show results. In religious settings we talk about a change of feelings to know we have forgiven. Feelings are difficult if not impossible to measure.

After defining forgiveness an examination will consider the theology and science behind forgiveness. The logic of the theological and neurobiological benefits will be presented to make the logical case for learning to practice forgiveness. (People don't always make decisions based solely on logic, however the logic is convincing.) A method for the process of forgiving that I

⁵ Luke 10:27 (NRSV).

have seen work in individuals will be stated. The benefits that go beyond the individual will be explored, and this paper will end with a discussion of the research on why we have difficulty forgiving ourselves.

I am beginning with the assumption that forgiveness is a practice that is valuable for the individual and the community and no argument needs to be made to support that we should learn to forgive and practice forgiveness. When asked if everyone needs to be forgiven, the answer is yes.

Sometimes people bring up the example of murderer and say that a murderer should never be forgiven. That is one choice. The other choice is to realize that God created that murderer and there is something that God loves about that murderer. We are called to forgive everyone God created so we need to learn to forgive even a murderer. We should never condone what the murderer did, but even the murderer needs to be forgiven. It is only in forgiveness that we can learn compassion for everyone and bring a little more peace in the world.

Small Group Study

The second part of this D Min project is a small group study on forgiveness. Small group studies are used many times in the church. Small groups allow people to build community for support in a particular situation. Small groups also allow participants to see how other people interpret scripture, and have discussions based on their individual experiences. Tolerance, love, and compassion are developed in small groups as people share with each other.

One of the most successful small group studies in the United Methodist Church is *Disciple: Becoming Disciples through Bible Study*. The initial groups for Disciple were in the late 1980s, and subsequent editions of the material were released as late as the last two years. In the leader's guide, instructions are given for the leaders of the small groups. These instructions

talk about the benefits of small groups and give guidance for the leader to facilitate discussion, draw out the quiet person, deal with the person who monopolizes the conversation, handle conflict when it arises, and suggests how to prepare questions for the group.⁶

In the five week small group study included in the appendix the first four weeks each share one step in the process of forgiving. The last week discusses the issue of self-forgiveness. An overview is included that discusses small group dynamics and a leader's guide accompanies each week.

Definition of Forgiveness for this Project

As I mentioned, there is no standardized definition of forgiveness. Over the years as I have preached on forgiveness and helped individuals with forgiveness, I have developed my own definition of forgiveness. The definition of forgiveness that I have adopted is: *Forgiveness is the elimination of all desire for revenge and personal ill will toward those who have wronged us. Forgiveness is an inner peace of heart and the freedom of not having our lives defined by the injuries we have suffered.* Some authors avoid defining forgiveness and instead focus on their research or interest. In those cases where a definition is stated, the definition above shares some common characteristics. Getting rid of the desire for revenge and the freedom from the pain of a past hurt appear to be common to both theological views and health views. Some definitions from the theological perspective emphasize God's forgiveness of us. Some definitions from a science and health perspective emphasize behaviors that can be measured or try to establish links between forgiveness and health. Every writer, whether they provide a definition of forgiveness or not, considers the practice of forgiveness important in our lives.

⁶ Harriett Jane Olson, *Disciple: Becoming Disciples Through Bible Study* (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 2005), 9-13.

Historical Context and Literature Review

In this project the emphasis is primarily on *interpersonal forgiveness*, with a brief examination of self-forgiveness, and on the implications of forgiveness on our families, our communities, and our nations. Forgiveness has been a topic of interest for centuries, with the definition and the focus of forgiveness changing through the centuries.

Martha Nussbaum declares that forgiveness as we use the term today was not part of ancient Greek ethics.⁷ In the time of the Hebrew Bible the focus on God's mercy and loving kindness was in tension with God's righteousness and wrath. God's mercy offers redemption to the offender or the chosen nation (Israel). Redemption was about the relationship between God and human beings or between God and Israel. The human being or Israel was reconciled with God. Redemption is in contrast with the righteous and wrathful image of God. God's anger is kindled when Israel disobeys God's commandments. In Exodus 32 God tells Moses that the people Moses brought out of Egypt have disobeyed God. God will destroy the Israelites. "Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation."⁸ God will start over with humans with Moses. Moses reminds God about his promises, and how the abandonment of the Israelites will look to the Egyptians. Moses implores God to change his mind and have mercy, and God does indeed change his mind.⁹ Likewise, Numbers 14:18 tells us that God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, but will not forgive the guilty. God will inflict the sins of the parents on the children to the third and fourth generations.¹⁰ Secularly, a king or ruler had mercy on a subject when the king or ruler

⁷ Martha Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 9.

⁸ Exodus 2:10 (NRSV).

⁹ Exodus 2:7-14 (NRSV).

¹⁰ Numbers 14:18 (NRSV).

dismissed the committed offense. The king or ruler pardoned (forgave) the offender. In the times that Martha Nussbaum describes or the times described in the Hebrew Bible there is little or nothing to support one person forgiving another person (interpersonal forgiveness).

Jesus supported the Hebrew Bible view of forgiveness, and expanded the understanding of forgiveness to one person forgiving another person. Jesus taught that God was loving and merciful and forgiving of us. In some cases when Jesus healed he forgave the sins of the person. For example, in Matthew 9 (NRSV), Jesus tells a paralytic that his sins were forgiven. The scribes were thinking that Jesus was blaspheming because only God could forgive sins. Jesus knew the scribe's thoughts, and asked which was more difficult; to forgive sins or to say to the paralytic to stand up and walk. Then to show his authority Jesus told the paralytic to stand up and walk.¹¹

Jesus extended the understanding of forgiveness to people forgiving one another. When asked the greatest commandments by a lawyer in Luke 10 (NRSV), Jesus replied the first was to love God and the second was to love neighbor as ourselves.¹² Loving our neighbor involved living in harmony and peace and requires forgiving one another. Jesus also told us that the consequences of one person not forgiving another person had an impact on whether God forgives us. In the Lord's Prayer and in the parables, the message was "If we forgive, then God forgives us, and if we do not forgive, then God will not forgive us."¹³

Fast forward to the twenty first century and the interest in forgiveness has greatly increased. Numerous books, articles, and movies give us messages about forgiveness. Across

¹¹ Matthew 9:2-7 (NRSV).

¹² Luke 10:25-28 (NRSV).

¹³ Matthew 6:12 (NRSV).

all the books, and other media there is not a single definition of forgiveness and not a single area of focus.

One of the reasons for the lack of a single definition is the argument for who is able to give forgiveness. For some who write from a theological perspective, God is the forgiver. Stephen Cherry, in his chapter “Uses and Abuses of Self-Forgiveness,” found in the book *Forgiveness Practice*, indicates that we can’t forgive ourselves. Only God can forgive us or others whom we have hurt.¹⁴ Adam Hamilton, a United Methodist pastor of the Church of the Resurrection, and Miroslav Volf, a theologian who writes from personal experience, both say that forgiveness starts with divine forgiveness. Adam Hamilton indicates that forgiveness starts when we recognize our own sin, and that if we don’t ask God for forgiveness we carry the guilt of every sin we have committed.¹⁵ Miroslav Volf says that God is the forgiver, and whenever forgiveness is granted it involves three people, God, the offender, and the victim.¹⁶

Another reason for the lack of a standardized definition is the varied interest in studying forgiveness. Some look at forgiveness from a theological view, some from a scientific and health view, some from a methodological view (how to forgive), some from the implications to communities, and finally some from a small group study. The areas of interest cause the definition to be developed related to that particular area. I am going to do an initial examination of the literature in each of these areas in this chapter, and I will go into more depth in each of the successive chapters. Some of the books and materials have overlap between two categories. For a single book or other source I will mention it in only one of the categories.

¹⁴ Stephen Cherry, “Uses and Abuses of Self-Forgiveness,” in *Forgiveness in Practice*, ed. Stephen Hance (London, UK: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2019), 72.

¹⁵ Adam Hamilton, *Forgiveness: Finding Peace Through Letting Go* (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 2012), 13.

¹⁶ Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 130.

In the area of the theological view there is a lot of variety. The religious books on forgiveness may start with recognizing ourselves as sinners and needing the forgiveness of God. Adam Hamilton's small group study *Forgiveness: Finding Peace through Letting Go*, starts with the idea that to talk about forgiveness is to talk about sin. God is the answer redeeming us from sin. He tells the story of filling a backpack with rocks, putting the backpack on, and preaching. Adam Hamilton got winded and soon his shoulders slumped. This is the burden if we don't recognize ourselves as sinners and receive forgiveness from God for our sins.¹⁷

Another religious look at forgiveness is from Martha Nussbaum. She writes in her book, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice*, that forgiveness as is commonly used is "an all-purpose term of commendation in the general neighborhood of dealing with wrongdoing."¹⁸ This all-purpose use of forgiveness is in her terms, transactional forgiveness. A transaction happens between God and the person who sinned. The person must admit their sin and do penance to receive God's forgiveness.¹⁹ In her view transactional forgiveness is a "displaced vindictiveness and a concealed resentment that are pretty ungenerous and actually not so helpful in human relations."²⁰

Martha Nussbaum differentiates between transactional forgiveness, unconditional forgiveness, or unconditional love and generosity. Unconditional forgiveness is modeled by Jesus at the Last Supper and on the cross. At the Last Supper and on the cross Jesus gave forgiveness without conditions. After Jesus' death, with Jesus no longer physically in the world, we cannot receive unconditional forgiveness from Jesus. Martha Nussbaum believes that the

¹⁷ Hamilton, *Forgiveness*, 6-15.

¹⁸ Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, 59.

¹⁹ Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, 11-12.

²⁰ Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, 12.

church as an institution reverted to conditional forgiveness (transactional forgiveness) to maintain the power of the church.²¹

The third option is unconditional love and generosity. When we are hurt and/or angry we offer love and generosity instead of forgiveness. Martha Nussbaum tells the story of the families of the victims in the Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church addressing Dylan Roof offering forgiveness and love, saying that love was stronger than hate.²²

A third book I mention here is Miroslav Volf's *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*. Miroslav Volf also starts with God as the initiator of forgiveness. When sin came into the world through Adam, God who had given creation became God the forgiver. God "condemns the fault and spares the doer (of the act)."²³

Whenever we forgive another person who has hurt us, that forgiveness takes place in a three way relationship; the offender, the victim, and God. When we decide to forgive a person, in Miroslav Volf's view that person still remains guilty before God, until they admit their sin. We can't relieve their guilt before God, but our forgiveness is for the benefit of the person who hurts us.²⁴

The area of science and health and the relationship to forgiveness is a more recent topic of interest. Science is dependent on research using data that can be measured. The technology developed in the 1980s to be able to measure the brain and other physical parts of the body was used to be able to link objective measurements to forgiveness.

For example, studies such as the ones noted in the next paragraphs indicate that stress, especially chronic stress, have negative effects on physical, mental, and emotional health. The

²¹ Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, 75-76.

²² Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, 77-78.

²³ Volf, *Free of Charge*, 141.

²⁴ Volf, *Free of Charge*, 130-131.

stress response system now shows ties to the question of forgiveness because forgiveness can lower the stress level by releasing the anger and hurt associated with an event.

One of the most recent books in this area is *Forgiveness and Health: Scientific Evidence and Theories relating Forgiveness to Better Health* edited by Loren L. Toussaint, Everett L. Worthington, Jr. and David R. Williams.²⁵ The authors of the individual chapters help in defining forgiveness in terms of physical, mental, and emotional health. The authors discuss what measures are used, reveal the evidence of the research, and explain the applications of forgiveness in health settings. The details of what forgiveness is and the measurements used are expanded in the chapter on health and forgiveness. Throughout the book the use of forgiveness is seen as positive with one exception. When people forgive because of obligation rather than engaging in forgiveness emotionally, the benefits aren't always positive.²⁶ Authentic forgiveness involves telling the story and processing the emotions to be able to forgive the person who has hurt us.

Also dealing with forgiveness and health is *The Forgiveness Project: The Startling Discovery of how to Overcome Cancer, Find Health, and Achieve Peace* by Michael S. Barry. Michael Barry, who is a pastor, implemented a forgiveness program at the Cancer Treatment Centers of America. The book tells the stories of some of the people in the program and the keys Michael Barry has found to promote forgiveness. Michael Barry writes that his book is not a step by step plan on how to forgive. Instead, he finds key insights for each person are the way to forgiveness. The stories in the book use the insights of grappling with the idea of fairness, a

²⁵ Loren L. Toussaint, Everett L. Worthington, Jr., David R. Williams, eds., *Forgiveness and Health: Scientific Evidence and Theories Relating Forgiveness to Better Health* (Heidelberg: Springer Science + Business Media, 2015).

²⁶ Toussaint, *Forgiveness and Health*, 151.

dream where God convinced the patient to forgive, and learning to empathize with sick people as ways to be able to forgive.²⁷

A third book to mention in the area of health and forgiveness is *Forgive to Live* by Dick Tibbits. Dick Tibbits discusses the mind and body connection, emotional responses we have, and the effect forgiveness can have on our health. There is an appendix on a research study about hypertension and forgiveness.²⁸

When we look at the books that discuss the methodological view of forgiveness, there are so many books that it is impossible to cover all the methods explained. In this literature review I will present the method used in this project. In the chapter on Methods of Forgiveness other methodologies will be discussed.

The book that best describes the steps of forgiveness that I have used is Desmond Tutu's *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and our World*.²⁹ As you might imagine from the title of the book there are four steps to forgiving and healing. The first step is telling the story, followed by naming the emotions we feel, followed by forgiving, and the last step is to decide whether to reconcile with the other person or to end the relationship.³⁰ These steps are the basis of the steps I used in the small group study in this project.

The final category is small group studies. The small group studies that I reviewed for this project were varied. *Forgiveness: A Lenten Study* by Marjorie J. Thompson begins with the

²⁷ Michel Barry, *The Forgiveness Project: The Startling Discovery of How to Overcome Cancer, Find Health, and Achieve Peace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2011), 34.

²⁸ Dick Tibbits, *Forgive to Live* (Altamonte Springs, FL: Florida Hospital Publishing, 2016), 15.

²⁹ Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and our World* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publisher, 2014).

³⁰ Tutu and Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving*, 7-92.

statement that there can be “no Christianity without forgiveness.”³¹ “Without forgiveness there is no future worthy of human life and community as God surely intended them to be in the originating vision of Creation.”³²

While she discusses whether forgiveness is for the individual or the community, her definition answers the question that forgiveness is about community. Forgiveness is defined as “an outpouring of love from the inner life of the Trinity and can only be fully understood when experienced as a transforming power in the life of a human community that mirror’s God’s being.”³³

After the first chapter which deals with the introduction, the next three chapters deal with practices that we do to prepare ourselves to forgive. We complete a self-examination, learn to be honest with ourselves, and seek repentance. Marjorie Thompson tells us that the “first order of business is not to forgive others but to receive the forgiveness God offers us in the agonizingly out stretched arms of Christ on the cross.”³⁴

Barbara Crafton writes a small group study entitled, *Embracing Forgiveness*. Crafton’s view of forgiveness is found in a quote at the beginning of each session. Crafton acknowledges that forgiveness is difficult; “in these intractable times when forgiveness seems impossible, step back and let God do some work. The sufficiency of God is bigger than ours.”³⁵ No matter how difficult, forgiveness is worthwhile. Forgiveness allows us to take a step forward and expand our world. The beginning of the book gives tips for leading the sessions and tips on group

³¹ Marjorie Thompson, *Forgiveness: A Lenten Study* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Publishing, 2014), viii.

³² Thompson, *Forgiveness: A Lenten Study*, vii.

³³ Thompson, *Forgiveness: A Lenten Study*, 7.

³⁴ Thompson, *Forgiveness: A Lenten Study*, 37.

³⁵ Barbara Cawthorne Crafton and Tim Scorer, *Embracing Forgiveness: A Five Session Study* (Denver, CO: Morehouse Educational Resources, 2014), 57.

facilitation. The handbook is also a workbook for each participant with each session offering multiple options of discussion topics to have flexibility to meet the needs of the group. Some of the sessions start with a text from the Bible, and some of the sessions start with a story.³⁶

The literature mentioned here is a sample of the literature on the topic of forgiveness. The rich variety of material reminds us of the importance of forgiveness and the benefit forgiveness can have for ourselves and our communities.

My Personal Story

One of the reasons I wanted to write about forgiveness and help others learn about forgiveness is because of my personal experience. I grew up in a home with an alcoholic father and a verbally abusive mother. For many years, the negative messages I learned as a child in my home defined my life and caused problems in my relationships. It wasn't until I was an adult that I realized how the behavior of both my parents had wounded me.

Looking back on my childhood, I realize I felt very much alone and very unloved by my parents. Like most children I transferred the relationship I experienced with my parents into my relationship with God. Therefore, I felt unloved and uncared for by God. As I became a teenager, and young adult, I believed in God, a God who loved everyone, everyone that is except me. Since my parents didn't love me as I expected I believed in a God who didn't love or care for me personally. Additionally, as a child I never thought about forgiving my parents because I didn't realize there was anything to forgive. I thought what I was experiencing was normal.

As a young adult in a United Methodist Church I learned about God's love and about forgiveness. As I went on a Walk to Emmaus, I turned my belief about God loving everyone

³⁶ Crafton, *Embracing Forgiveness*, 1-88.

except me, into a personal belief that God loved me.³⁷ I also realized that I was reliving daily the messages I had received as a child and how wounded I was.

Sometime after the Walk to Emmaus I made the choice to forgive my parents. I began praying that I would better understand my parents, and I prayed that I would open my heart to what God would tell me. I prayed for months before I started seeing changes in my attitude toward my parents. Through the help of many others and through God's healing power, I found forgiveness for the treatment I received as a child.

There were times when I would feel I had forgiven, and then one of my parents would say something and I would be sad and angry again. I would once again make the decision to forgive and once again begin the process. After many years it was by forgiving my parents that I was freed from the hurts of my childhood.

I have seen the changes in my own life that forgiveness has made, and I pray that others can find healing and peace from the practice of forgiveness. While I saw great changes with forgiving my parents, sometimes forgiveness continues to be a challenge for me. Other people in my life have said or done things that have hurt me or made me angry. I have learned to see patterns in the events that hurt me or make me angry and worked on the underlying hurts from earlier events. Forgiveness is something I will struggle with my whole life. I know with God's help I can meet the challenges that are presented to me.

Summary

Forgiveness is our call from Jesus. He teaches us to forgive through his parables, and in teaching the Lord's Prayer our forgiveness is tied to God's forgiveness of us. Jesus practices

³⁷ The Walk to Emmaus is a three day Protestant retreat that came out of the Roman Catholic Cursillo Movement. Through a series of talks and other activities participants are encouraged to find ways to live out their individual call to discipleship in their home, church, and community.

forgiveness when he forgives sins of people he encounters. He forgives the paralytic when the paralytic is healed and he forgives the sins of the woman who pours oil over his feet.³⁸ Yet, forgiveness may be the most difficult thing we are called to do as Christians. It is easier to pray for someone than it is to forgive someone because we can pray from a distance. Forgiveness is personal and up close. Forgiveness is powerful for achieving peace and harmony in our lives, and sometimes we forget this power of forgiveness. Forgiveness can change our lives and our relationships, and also has positive effects on our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health.

For some people there may be events that they consider unforgivable. Through this paper and the small group study I would pray that those people might be open to considering forgiveness for the benefits that forgiveness offers to the individual and to relationships in families and communities.

³⁸ Matthew 9:2-8 (NRSV); Luke 7:36-50 (NRSV).

What is Forgiveness?

As mentioned in the Introduction, Christians are called to forgive and we learn about forgiveness in our churches. As a pastor whenever I have preached on forgiveness, the topic generated more questions than almost any other topic. It seems that forgiveness is understood and accepted in theoretical terms, but not understood very well as a practice in our lives. So while forgiveness is a topic of discussion in our churches and in our culture, when we want to undertake forgiveness of a person or an event we may be at a loss because we are not sure what forgiveness means or the steps in how to practice forgiveness.

People raise questions and make comments about forgiveness that indicate different perceptions of what forgiveness is. Sometimes questions are asked including, “Do I have to forgive?” “Aren’t there acts that are so terrible that those acts should not be forgiven?” “If I forgive, do I have to forget?” “How can I forgive if the other person doesn’t apologize?”³⁹

Some people think forgiving is a sign of weakness. Strength is the characteristic that is valued in our culture and forgiving someone is viewed as giving in to the other person, not a sign of strength. The logic is something like: “If I forgive, I am saying what the other person did was right and so the other person wins and I lose. If I lose, then I am weak.”⁴⁰ The dichotomy is that one person is strong and the other person weak. This of course is not true, but the perception that only one person can be strong exists in many parts of our culture.

Other people think that forgiving is incompatible with justice. “If I forgive, then I am saying that the other person did nothing wrong. If the other person did nothing wrong, there is no

³⁹ These questions are based on the questions I have heard from the parishioners after the sermons I preached.

⁴⁰ This logic is based on conversations I have had with parishioners.

need for justice.”⁴¹ Forgiveness, as defined in this paper, is about the change in us and independent of whether justice happens for any circumstance.

The result is that forgiveness is misunderstood by some people and in some circumstances. This chapter deals with the definition of forgiveness and some myths that people have about forgiveness. There is no standardized definition of forgiveness partly because forgiveness from a religious point of view can use faith and feelings in the definition and forgiveness from a scientific point of view needs measurements.

My definition of forgiveness is: *Forgiveness is the elimination of all desire for revenge and personal ill will toward those who have wronged us. Forgiveness is an inner peace of heart and the freedom of not having our lives defined by the injuries we have suffered.* I have come to this definition over the years as I reviewed literature and as I preached on forgiveness and helped individuals with forgiveness. This definition differs from a scientific definition because the scientific definitions rely on measurements.

There are several things to explain further about this definition. First, this definition is about *interpersonal forgiveness* and the benefits that a person receives from practicing forgiveness. If we have no desire for revenge, then we are free of the hurt from the past. We can live in the present and the future instead of dwelling on the past. We no longer believe that we can create a different and better past. Whether we have received an apology or not from the person who hurt us, we have released the pain we have felt. Thus, forgiveness is something a person does for themselves to bring healing and peace in their lives. The healing can be spiritual, and the healing can also be physical, mental, and emotional.

⁴¹ This logic is based on conversations I have had with parishioners.

Second, this definition applies to a person's thoughts, feelings, and behavior. When the feeling for revenge or ill will toward another person is reduced or gone, our thoughts can focus on the present instead of the recurring thoughts of the past hurt. When we forgive we can see the changes in behavior because we don't try to get even and we don't avoid the person who caused our hurt.

Third, there is no mention of God in this definition. This doesn't mean God is ignored or that God is not instrumental. My definition is about the individual and the changes in the individual. I view God as a loving and forgiving God. We know that God forgives us and in the Bible we see many examples of Jesus forgiving people he encountered in his ministry. It is God who accompanies us when we make the decision to forgive. However, in the definition I use, I focus on the individual.

The question arises how my definition for forgiveness compares to other definitions. To give a full comparison there needs to be a look at theological writers and then a look at scientific writers. It is obvious that all writers on forgiveness believe that forgiveness is important and beneficial to the individual. Some of the writers don't define forgiveness. In the religious writings, those writers who don't define forgiveness probably believe the readers have an understanding of what forgiveness is. In the science and health writings, definitions of forgiveness differ based on what is being measured.

Miroslav Volf, a theological writer, states that to understand our own forgiveness we first have to understand God's forgiveness of us. He continues that forgiveness is a special gift and has two elements. First, the offense must be named and condemned. Second, the person who has

been hurt from an offense gives the wrongdoer the gift of not counting the wrongdoing against his/her.⁴²

Marjorie J. Thompson in her book, *Companions in Christ: The Way of Forgiveness*, defines forgiveness partly with what forgiveness is not. She says, “Forgiveness is not merely a feeling. It is a disposition of our whole person, a habit of the heart, and intentional choices of action in relationship. It does not involve trying to manipulate ourselves or others into feeling forgiven or forgiving.”⁴³

Desmond Tutu also focuses on what forgiveness is not in his book, *No Future Without Forgiveness*. Desmond Tutu says, “Forgiveness and being reconciled are not about pretending that things are other than they are. It is not about patting one another on the back and turning a blind eye to the wrong.”⁴⁴

In the scientific area in the book, *Forgiveness: How to make Peace with your Past and Get on with your Life*, psychologists Sidney Simon and Suzanne Simon don’t have a simple definition of forgiveness. Instead they provide a list of what forgiveness is. The list includes: forgiveness is an internal process; forgiveness is letting go of the intense emotions attached to incidents from our past; forgiveness is accepting that nothing we do to punish the offender will heal us; forgiveness is recognizing that we no longer need our grudges and resentments, our hatred, and self-pity; and forgiveness is letting go of the intense emotions attached to incidents from our past.⁴⁵

⁴² Volf, *Free of Charge*, 129-130.

⁴³ Thompson, *Forgiveness*, 58.

⁴⁴ Desmond Tutu, *No future Without forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 270.

⁴⁵ Sidney B. Simon and Suzanne Simon (New York: Philip Lief Group, Inc, 1990), 18-

There are other definitions and they are similar to the ones presented here, so they are not included here. Forgiveness is a choice that we all have to make at some point in our lives. No one can live a life without at some point finding the need for forgiveness. We all have hurts and wounds in our lives that need to be healed. A minor hurt of an unkind word or a person being late for a meeting causes us a momentary reaction that is quickly forgotten. We have forgiven the person or event probably without even knowing it.

Sometimes an event is not easily forgotten. Sometimes when an event occurs that leaves us feeling hurt or angry we carry that hurt and anger with us. We might find ourselves frequently thinking about the event or the person who we think caused the hurt or anger. We wish we could go back in time and relive the event with a different outcome. The problem is the past can't be changed. What can be changed are our feelings and reactions to the past. Forgiveness allows us to give up the idea of having a better past and see the event that caused us the hurt in a new light. Forgiveness allows us to remember the event, but not be controlled by the event. When we forgive we can focus on the present and the future instead of the past. Forgiveness brings a sense of peace that allows us to make decisions that are unclouded by bitterness or resentment.⁴⁶

When we decide that we want to be free of the hurt or anger we are feeling, we make a choice to forgive and enter this process. Forgiveness is always a choice. Forgiveness doesn't happen and there is no change in us without our making the conscious choice to forgive.

Once we decide to forgive, forgiveness is a process that we work through to release the feelings of hurt or anger that we are feeling. There is no magic word we can use or a pill we can take to fix the hurt or anger immediately. The process is a step by step way to change the way we

⁴⁶ Fred Luskin, *Forgive for love: The Missing Ingredient for a Healthy and Lasting Relationship* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 13.

feel and think about the person and/or the event that happened. The process could take minutes or hours when the hurt is small, but most of the time when we feel hurt or anger, the process can take months or years.

The good news is that forgiveness can be learned. Some methods of how to forgive will be examined later in this paper. Forgiveness is not easy and we can struggle with forgiveness over our lifetime. We may think we have forgiven the person or the event, and then something happens that triggers us to feel the hurt or anger again. At that point we may choose to enter the process of forgiveness again.

A discussion on forgiveness is not complete without raising a question that people ask. “Is a person or event unforgivable?” Sometimes we believe the act is too awful to ever be forgiven. When we have that belief we find that the person or event that caused the wound or hurt is present frequently in our minds and memory. The person or event has control over us and our lives because we spend time reflecting on that person or event. We may even feel the emotions of the hurt again when we remember the person or event. It is only through forgiveness that we can take back the power to control how we feel about the event. Even knowing how forgiveness affects us, we may still choose not to forgive. That is our choice.

As I began this project I thought I had a good understanding of forgiveness. I discovered that there are some very different approaches and definitions for examining forgiveness. I want to mention one of those approaches here to give an alternative view of forgiveness.

This definition of forgiveness is by Colin Tipping in his book *Radical Forgiveness*.⁴⁷ Colin Tipping says that forgiveness is usually defined by a victim mentality. One person is an

⁴⁷ Colin Tipping, *Radical Forgiveness: A Revolutionary Five Step Process to Heal Relationships, Let Go of Anger & Blame, Find Peace in Any Situation* (Canada: Sounds True, 2009).

offender and the other person is a victim. He states that radical forgiveness lets go of the victim model and understands that everything that happens is perfect for where we are.⁴⁸ There are no accidents in the understanding of radical forgiveness.

For example, if a person is hurt by being abandoned by a lover, the person is not a victim because he or she needed to learn the lesson of how to react to being abandoned. Everything that happens to us we bring on ourselves because we need the lessons of the situation. In the extreme if a person is raped or shot by a gun, it is not an accident, because the person needed that event to learn a lesson. Our soul is following a divine plan and our lives are purposeful, and therefore whatever happened was not wrong; nothing wrong happened.⁴⁹

Tipping says “Imagine how tough it might be to sell the idea of Radical Forgiveness to a Holocaust victim or someone who has just been raped or otherwise violently abused. Indeed, much of RFT’s (Radical Forgiveness Therapy) preliminary work involves creating a willingness to even look at the possibility of there being perfection in what happened.”⁵⁰

Tipping admits that radical forgiveness makes no sense to the rational mind, but making sense to the rational mind is not important. He believes that radical forgiveness works whether you believe in the system or not.⁵¹ Tipping says that radical forgiveness follows from Jesus and what Jesus taught. For Colin Tipping, Jesus says there are no victims. We have misunderstood and done an injustice because we have made Jesus a victim. Instead, according to Colin Tipping Jesus calls us to let go of the idea that anyone at any time is a victim.⁵²

⁴⁸ Tipping, *Radical Forgiveness*, 57.

⁴⁹ Tipping, *Radical Forgiveness*, 57.

⁵⁰ Tipping, *Radical Forgiveness*, 83.

⁵¹ Tipping, *Radical Forgiveness*, 40.

⁵² Tipping, *Radical Forgiveness*, xvii-xviii.

I disagree with the starting point of Jesus' teaching that Colin Tipping uses. I think Jesus would acknowledge that there are victims in some situations. While Jesus would say that we are victims in a circumstance, Jesus would tell us that our identity is much more than being a victim in that circumstance. For example, Jesus kneels with the woman accused in adultery, and talks with the woman at the well.⁵³ In each case Jesus understands that the woman is a victim of the societal rules. However, Jesus sees more in each woman. There are victims in life. Likewise, victims of rape or gunshot are victims of the situation and not living out a perfect divine plan. Forgiveness allows us to remember that we were a victim without being trapped and controlled by victimhood.

I want to close this chapter with a few of the misunderstandings about forgiveness. First, forgiving is not the same as forgetting. When we forgive we do not forget the hurt that occurred. Forgiving is about changing our response to the hurt and the wound that we carry. Forgiving is about reacting differently to the hurt that occurred, but not erasing the memory of the event or the hurt. I once heard the story of a woman who had been in an abusive relationship. She left the relationship, and when she talked about the relationship, she said "I forgave him and I pray for him, but I will not let him in my home again."⁵⁴ She remembered the hurt and will not expose herself to the possibility of abuse again.

Second, forgiveness is not the same as saying the behavior was acceptable. Forgiveness is not condoning the behavior. Forgiveness is about letting go of the hurt and/or anger associated with the event and still understanding that what happened was not appropriate. It requires courage to know what happened was not appropriate and still release the hurt we have felt. I had a member of a church who told me about her father not attending her high school graduation. He

⁵³ John 8 (NRSV); John 4 (NRSV).

⁵⁴ This story was shared at a retreat I attended in Atlanta in 2009.

was passed out and unable to attend. She forgave her father, but still remembered that his behavior was not appropriate.

Third, forgiveness doesn't mean that you have to reconcile with the person who hurt you. Only after you go through the steps of forgiveness do you need to make the decision of whether or not to reconcile. It is only after we have gone through a forgiveness process that we can make a clear decision about whether reconciling is in our best interest. When a couple divorces, it is painful. The divorce may be very difficult with lots of conflict. Even when the divorce is not as difficult and forgiveness is practiced on both sides, the decision is to go separate ways.

Fourth, there is a need to forgive whether or not the person apologizes for what happened. We need to remember that forgiveness is about changing our desire for revenge or getting even. Forgiveness is about freeing us from the pain and bringing peace in our lives. The desire for revenge and the freedom from pain changes through the process of forgiveness whether the other person apologizes or not. We certainly hope the other person will realize how they have hurt us and offer an apology. In an ideal world, forgiveness would always be two-way. However, in many cases, the other person doesn't apologize. They may not know that they hurt us, or they may be indifferent to whether they hurt us or not. It is up to us to forgive without the apology from the person who hurt us.

Fifth, forgiveness is a process. We make the choice to enter the process and work through the process. Forgiveness may take months or years depending on the depth of the hurt. The steps of the process will be discussed in a later chapter.

At its core forgiveness is about us and our lives. Forgiveness changes us. Forgiveness helps our relationships and our health. Forgiveness is about how we look at the world and people and events in the world.

Theological View of Forgiveness

The theology of forgiveness has two perspectives. First is divine forgiveness and second is interpersonal forgiveness; forgiveness between two or more people. Divine forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness share the characteristic of letting go of the offense and not wishing ill will toward the person who committed the offense. Beyond this basic characteristic, divine forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness look very different.

Divine forgiveness is about God forgiving humans. Christianity uses the model for forgiveness from God that says we sin: we confess that we have sinned, God forgives us, and we are restored to our relationship with God. This assumes that when we sin our offense is not only against another person or against God's creation, but also against God.

In the Hebrew Bible, David states in Psalm 51 verses 3-4, "For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight." David writes his confession to God for the sins he has committed. Then David asks for a pardon in verses 10-12. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit."⁵⁵ In the New Testament, when Jesus is sharing the last supper with his disciples, he uses the words of forgiveness. In Matthew 26:28 (NRSV) Jesus says, "for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." Jesus will forgive our sins with his blood through the crucifixion (and resurrection). The Roman Catholic Church has established confession for a parishioner to name their sins and receive forgiveness from the priest for those

⁵⁵ Psalm 51:3-4;10-12 (NRSV).

sins. In the United Methodist Church, forgiveness is given directly from God. In the liturgy for Holy Communion the pastor announces, “In the name of Jesus Christ you are forgiven.”⁵⁶

Adam Hamilton says, “The process of (divine) forgiveness begins with our awareness and understanding of sin, for if we are not aware of our sin, we go on living self-absorbed lives while hurting others.”⁵⁷ Miroslav Volf, a theological writer, states that to understand our own forgiveness we first have to understand God’s forgiveness of us.⁵⁸

Understanding God’s forgiveness is important, and I believe that God’s forgiveness is part of God’s nature. However, using the model of sin, confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation doesn’t cover all situations. Marcus Borg, in the third session of “Living the Questions,” explains that the model we have used for sin, confession, and forgiveness is not valid in all situations.⁵⁹ He explains that if a person is oppressed, they need to be freed from the oppression, not made to confess for some sin, and then forgiven. Borg gives the examples of the Israelites in Egypt. The Israelites were oppressed and needed freedom from the oppression. Another situation where the model doesn’t work is when a person is isolated. Borg says if a person is isolated and alone, they need to be welcomed back into the community. The woman at the well in John 4 (NRSV) is isolated from the other women in the community. The other women come to the well early in the morning and this woman is not allowed to come with the other women. The woman at the well comes there at noon. Jesus talks to her and his words make her a part of the community again.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 8.

⁵⁷ Hamilton, *Forgiveness*, 17.

⁵⁸ Volf, *Free of Charge*, 129-130.

⁵⁹ *Living The Questions*, “Session 3,” directed by Jeff Procter-Murphy and David Felten, (Harper One, 2005), DVD.

⁶⁰ Murphy and Felton, *Living The Questions*.

When we try to apply the model of sin, confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation to every situation, we are implying that a person has sinned in that situation. This had led some pastors to tell women in abusive relationships to confess that they haven't been the wives they need to be and to stay in the relationship.

We are all sinners, but we don't necessarily sin in every situation. There are also times when we sin, but aren't aware that we have sinned. When we say or do something that hurts another person without realizing we have caused pain, we have sinned. God realizes our mistakes and forgives us. Thus, God can forgive us when forgiveness is needed, whether we confess or not.

It would be nice to think that we always know the sensitivities of others and avoided offending anyone with our words. Part of my prayer at night is asking God's forgiveness for those times when I missed someone in need during the day, or I have said something that hurt another and was unaware of the hurt I caused. We need to be reflective of our behavior and what we do, but we aren't without mistakes in our lives.

Sometimes we need God's forgiveness for our thoughts or feelings. We blame God for what happens to us. When a loved one dies or we develop a life threatening disease, a person might say, "Why did God let that happen?"⁶¹ Another response might be, "I no longer trust God and I don't pray to God because God let my loved one die."⁶² This is an indirect way of blaming God for our loss. In this case we might think of asking God's forgiveness for our feelings about our loss.

One of the differences between divine forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness is that God is not a victim of our sin. We believe that God is affected by what we do in our lives, and

⁶¹ This question is one from many parishioners over the years.

⁶² This question is one from many parishioners over the years.

we even assign emotions to God. We say that God is sad or angry when we don't follow God's commandments. However, God is not a victim in the same way a person is a victim of the hurt we have caused.

Another difference between divine forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness is that we believe God's forgiveness wipes the slate clean. God remembers our offense, but doesn't hold it against us. We know that God can remember our offense, and we usually say that while God can remember our offense, God chooses not to. In interpersonal relationships we follow the definition that forgiving doesn't mean that we need to forget the hurt or say that the hurt was justified.

A final difference is that in divine forgiveness we believe the relationship is restored. In interpersonal forgiveness, after we forgive we can choose whether to restore the relationship or not. In divine forgiveness we may doubt that God has forgiven us or we may feel distant from God and feel the relationship has been damaged. When we feel distant it is because we have moved away, not because God moved away from us. In interpersonal relationships we make a conscious decision on whether or not to continue the relationship or to end the relationship. For example, in an abusive relationship, forgiveness is for freeing us from the pain and restoring us to wholeness through healing, and it may not be healthy to continue in the relationship.

Miroslav Volf says that being able to forgive is a gift from God. We can only forgive because God empowers us to forgive another person. God is beside us whenever we forgive. Miroslav expresses God being beside us by saying that forgiveness takes place in a three way relationship; the offender, the victim, and God.⁶³

⁶³ Volf, *Free of Charge*, 130.

Miroslav Volf states that when we decide to forgive a person (with God's help), the forgiveness is for the benefit of the other person. While we might also benefit from the act of forgiveness, the primary beneficiary is the one who has hurt us. We release the offender from the hurt they caused.⁶⁴ I believe that the primary beneficiary of the process of forgiveness is the person who forgives. The person who forgives is released from the pain of the past and the hurt no longer controls the thoughts of that person. The offender may benefit, or the offender may not know forgiveness has been given.

Interpersonal forgiveness, forgiveness of one person of another is one of the behaviors Christians are called to do. Christians are called to have compassion for one another, to pray for one another, and to serve one another. In addition to these three, Christians are called to forgive one another. Of all the things mentioned that we are called to do, forgiveness may be the most difficult. Praying for someone can be completed from a distance. Forgiveness involves changing and transforming our thoughts, feelings, and actions. We must get personally involved in the practice of forgiving.

There are Biblical texts that call us to forgive. Before we discuss a few of the texts, we start with fundamental beliefs. We are created in God's image and share some of the characteristics of God's image. God loves each person and we are called to love each person. God forgives each person and we are called to forgive each person.

Another concept is the Godhead (God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit) is a community. The Godhead models for us the need for community and wants us to follow that example, and live in community with others. Being in community teaches us how to love one another. In community

⁶⁴ Volf, *Free of Charge*, 130-131.

we learn how to see the needs of others. We learn how to be compassionate. And in community we learn how to forgive.

Being in community can be challenging. There are many different personalities. There are different perspectives on how we look at the world. In spite of all the differences in community, we are called to love one another in community and to forgive offenses. This means that we need to learn how to deal with people who are different from us. In addition, we need to learn to deal with conflict. Forgiveness is one of the practices to help us deal with differences in community.

In Colossians 3:12-13 (NRSV) Paul tells us that we are called to put away all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and instead be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven us. Paul doesn't tell us how to put away all bitterness, wrath, and anger, but the text implies that forgiving one another is one way to change from malice to kindness and tenderheartedness. We are reminded that we are to forgive as we have been forgiven. In this passage Paul is talking about people being in community giving and receiving forgiveness. In the community people are to forgive each other. We know that reciprocal forgiving is ideal, and that sometimes forgiveness is not reciprocal, but one sided. We may forgive someone and they don't admit to having wronged us, or we may forgive someone only to have him or her commit the wrong again. Then we might wonder what good does it do to forgive?

Paul tells us if the question we are asking is about what good it does to forgive, then we are not asking the correct question. Instead the question is how do we forgive as Christ has forgiven us? Christ is always ready to forgive us and so we need to be ready to forgive another person even when forgiveness is one way. The good news is that when God mandates that we

forgive, the Holy Spirit empowers us to know God as a God of love and forgiveness so God will help us through the process of forgiveness.

Further, a mistake we make a lot of the time is we look at who the person is who has wronged us, and we look at what they have done to us. We feel the hurt or anger and we want revenge. We might ask, “Do I really have to forgive this person?” or “How far am I to go with this forgiveness?” Paul would tell us to look at who God is, and what God has done for us. The real question is “How far has God gone with you?” If you ask “Isn’t there some limit to this forgiveness?” then, you need to ask, “What are the limits to God’s grace and forgiveness?” We forgive because of who God is and what God has done.

One of the theological arguments for human beings needing forgiveness comes from the story of Adam and Eve in the garden in the first chapters of Genesis. Some Christians use a theology of original sin where we all inherit the sin of Adam. Therefore, we are born into sin and need forgiveness for the innate sin we carry. We need forgiveness from God before we take our first breath. Sin came into the world through a man, Adam, and a man, Jesus, restored our relationship with God through death and resurrection. This theology continues that Jesus Christ had to die for the atonement of our original sin. This can lead us to believe that we need forgiveness for who we are, not our behavior and actions.

I mention here two parables of Jesus that center on forgiveness.

The first parable is the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15 (NRSV). In this parable we see the extraordinary love of a father for his son, and the forgiveness that accompanies that love. The parable of The Prodigal Son is more complex than only the story of a loving father welcoming his son home, says R. Alan Culpepper. This parable is a two story parable; the

prodigal son and also the story of the relationship of two sons, and their father.⁶⁵ For the purposes of this paper, I concentrate on the story of forgiveness. The Prodigal Son takes his inheritance and leaves home. He doesn't fare well in the world, and when he has spent everything, the story tells us he "comes to his senses." He returns home. His father sees him coming and rushes to greet him. A feast is prepared and all is forgiven. The father doesn't adjust his remaining estate to give the prodigal son another share, but the prodigal son is welcomed home. The prodigal son is forgiven for leaving home, for squandering his part of the inheritance, and for making bad decisions. This parable is used to compare how much God loves us and will forgive us no matter how poor our decisions are.

The second parable is from Matthew 18. This chapter is a series of teachings of Jesus to his disciples. The chapter begins with Jesus talking about having the humility of a child, then moves to a warning to not put a stumbling block to the little ones. Jesus then moves to the topic of sin and forgiveness. He cautions that if a member sins against you, first go to that person in private. Only then can you call in another person and make the offense public. It is here that Peter steps forward and lays the difficulty of forgiveness there at the feet of Jesus. Now in the day of Jesus the Rabbis taught that when someone wronged you, you should forgive up to three times. Then you could stop forgiving. So Peter may think he is pushing the outer limits of forgiveness. To be on the safe side, Peter doubles the required number of times, three, and adds one more and says, 'Should I forgive him seven times, Lord?' Jesus counters with no, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. In Jesus' day seventy-seven meant a very large number. M. Eugene Boring, in his commentary of Matthew, says Jesus' response of seventy-seven is not

⁶⁵ R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflection," in *The New Interpreters Bible: Volume IX*, ed. Leander E. Kick (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1995), 300.

about a number or doing the math, but about the nature of forgiveness. If anyone counts, they have not forgiven, but are waiting until the count has been completed so that revenge can be taken.⁶⁶

Then Jesus tells a parable. It is a story about a king and his servant. The king has loaned his servants money, and now he's decided to call in the loan. The king calls in his servant and finds the servant can't repay the loan. He owes ten thousand talents. That is probably about \$12M today. In the day of Jesus that servant would have had to work for 150,000 years to pay off the debt. So, the king in order to cut his losses, orders that the servant and his wife and his children are all to be sold into slavery, and then the king will recoup some of the loss.

The servant begins to beg for mercy. He is trying to buy some time. And then the most unexpected, unbelievable thing happens. The king doesn't just give him more time. He totally forgives the debt. He cancels it in its entirety. The loan is paid off. The man and his family are completely free.

I can imagine that the servant felt relief. He was forgiven. However, the story doesn't end there. This servant goes to another servant who owes the first servant money. The man who has just been forgiven millions of dollars is owed 100 denari. That is about the equivalent of \$2. Imagine, he has been forgiven a debt of \$12M, and he is asking to be repaid \$2. When the servant can't repay him and begs for mercy, the first servant shows no mercy. He throws the servant who owes him money into debtor's prison.

Other servants report this to the king and the king reverses his show of mercy. The real lesson comes in the final verse. Jesus says, "Unless you and I forgive our brothers and sisters

⁶⁶ M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreters Bible: Volume VIII*, ed. Leander E. Kick (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1995), 380.

from the heart, we are going wind up being shown no mercy from God.”⁶⁷ Boring summarizes the moral of the story, “Don’t be like the unforgiving servant.”⁶⁸ Now having no mercy from God doesn’t fit my image of God who is always loving and present and surrounding us with exactly what we need. But Jesus says that God will look at how we are treating our neighbor. Jesus and God have high expectations for us to show mercy to those we come in contact with.

This 18th chapter in Matthew makes it clear how seriously we need to take the concept of forgiveness. Our attitudes and our behavior affect how we treat our brothers and sisters and affect whether we forgive. Martha Nussbaum, in the book, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice*, states that we have a choice, either we forgive or we become the transgressor.⁶⁹

One other important conversation about forgiveness is found in Jesus teaching the disciples how to pray. Jesus was with his disciples and they asked Jesus how should we pray? Jesus gave the disciples the answer in what we call the Lord’s Prayer. When we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we ask God to forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

The Lord’s Prayer also tells us that God’s power to forgive us is contingent upon our power to forgive. God will forgive our trespasses if we forgive others and if we don’t forgive others, then God will not forgive us. Jesus teaches that we have the ability to practically and compassionately forgive one another and holds us to the standard of forgiving as God forgives us.

⁶⁷ Matthew 18:35 (NRSV).

⁶⁸ Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew,” 381.

⁶⁹ Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, 64.

Our theology of forgiveness affects our lives daily. It is clear that forgiveness is a practice to be used in our religious communities. We learn about forgiveness in our religious communities, so it seems appropriate that these communities practice forgiveness.

Our practice of forgiveness needs to be applied to other activities in our lives. Our practice of forgiveness needs to be applied to how we treat other people. In the Truth and Reconciliation Commission used in South Africa, Desmond Tutu, who led the Commission, called for prayer at the beginning and end of each meeting. He prayed that peace and healing would come to the people of South Africa as they dealt with the oppression and tragedies that had occurred in the history of the country.⁷⁰

Desmond Tutu also made his theology part of the Commission. “If the perpetrators were to be despaired of as monsters and demons, then we were thereby letting accountability go out the window because we were then declaring that they were not moral agents to be held responsible for the deeds they had committed. Much more importantly, it meant that we abandoned all hope of their being able to change for the better. Theology said they still, despite the awfulness of their deeds, remained children of God with the capability to repent, to be able to change.”⁷¹

We can learn from Desmond Tutu to take our practice of how we treat others and how we practice forgiveness into our daily lives and into our organizations. Maybe we belong to an organization and a conflict breaks out, or someone says something that hurts us or makes us angry. This situation gives us the opportunity to forgive and to model forgiveness to others. To release the anger and restore harmony in the organization, forgiveness may be needed.

⁷⁰ Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, 81.

⁷¹ Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, 83.

Martin Luther King, Jr. also emphasizes the need for the practice of forgiveness. “We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. It is impossible for he who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies.”⁷²

If we can’t forgive, we can’t love. Our call to love God and love our neighbor depends on our ability to forgive. As Christians we need to open our hearts to releasing the hurt we have felt and being prepared for healing and wholeness.

⁷² Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love*, Gift ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 44.

Science, Health, and Forgiveness

To complete a study of forgiveness we need to look at the reasons and benefits of forgiveness from a scientific and health perspective in addition to a theological perspective. It is not surprising to me that in addition to the theological reasons that we should forgive, forgiveness is important to our physical, mental, and emotional health. (If God cares for us, then God cares about our physical, mental, and emotional health.)

For many centuries the study of forgiveness was left to religious circles. Part of the reason may be the clear division between social sciences and religious studies. Part of the reason might be the need for observable behavior in the social sciences and forgiveness was not observable. Even today forgiveness is not measurable, but technology allows us to measure physical and mental attributes related to forgiveness.⁷³

It has only been in the last 40 or 50 years when techniques became available that science has taken up the challenge of whether forgiveness has an impact on our physical, emotional and mental well-being. In 1998 there were 58 studies. In 2005 there were 950 studies,⁷⁴ showing the increased interest in the study of forgiveness from a physical, mental, and emotional view.

From the evidence presented to date, it appears that forgiveness has a positive effect on our health, and not forgiving has a negative effect on our health. Some of the research regarding health and forgiveness ask the participants whether they have a religious affiliation or religious belief. Religious affiliation and religious belief appear to have an impact on the theory and the implementation of forgiveness. In fact, the exception to the positive effect of forgiveness was

⁷³ Michael E. McCullough, Kenneth I. Pargament, Carl E. Thoresen, eds., *Forgiveness: Theory, Research, and Practice* (New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2001), 3.

⁷⁴ Dobbmeier, *The Power of Forgiveness*, DVD.

found in the cases where religious beliefs obligated the person to forgive without engaging their emotions in the process of forgiveness.

The definitions of forgiveness in the area of science and health are different from the definitions used when examining forgiveness from a theological perspective. In the chapter “Defining Forgiveness: Historical Roots, Contemporary Research, and Key Considerations for Health Outcomes” in the book, *Forgiveness and Health*, a single definition is not offered, but characteristics of forgiveness are determined based on the goals and objectives of the research being completed. These characteristics include whether the research is focused on decreases in unforgiveness or increases in forgiveness, and whether the research analyzes changes in motivation and behavior.⁷⁵

The chapter, without defining forgiveness, differentiates two types of forgiveness: decisional and emotional. Decisional forgiveness is making the decision to forgive. Most of the time, the decision to forgive comes from a person’s principles or religious beliefs, and is usually accompanied by a desire to start or restore relationship with the offender. The research described in this chapter, indicates that decisional forgiveness relates to positive health through reconciling with the offender, which leads to improved relationships. Another benefit of decisional forgiveness is the reduction of ruminating over the event. If our attention and our minds keep us thinking about and reflecting on the event, the mind can’t rest.⁷⁶

Emotional forgiveness is motivated by empathic understanding of the offender and admitting that human beings are fallible. The benefits of emotional forgiveness include lower blood pressure readings and a reduction in the stress response to situations that could be

⁷⁵ Jeritt R. Tucker, Rachel L. Bitman, Nathaniel G. Wade, and Marilyn A. Cornish, “Defining Forgiveness: Historical Roots, Contemporary Research, and Key Considerations for Health Outcomes,” in *Forgiveness and Health*, ed. Toussaint, Worthington, Williams, 13-14.

⁷⁶ Tucker, “Defining Forgiveness,” 19-20.

stressful.⁷⁷ Even in emotional forgiveness, the decision has to be made to forgive the person or the event.

Michael S. Barry, in his book *The Forgiveness Project*, also does not have a single definition of forgiveness. Michael Barry says, “One methodological size does not fit all questions and answers” in research.⁷⁸ He contends that there are various measurement methods because people have different experiences of forgiveness.⁷⁹ Therefore, a single definition is not helpful to the research he does.

Fred Luskin in his book, *Forgive for Love: The Missing Ingredient for a Healthy and Lasting Relationship* uses some phrases to describe forgiveness. He says that forgiveness is “planning for the future rather than lamenting about the past,”⁸⁰ and comments that one of his favorite phrases is from the Lion King, where Timon and Pumba counsel Simba to “leave your past behind you.”⁸¹

In addition, Fred Luskin says there are two components to forgiveness. The first is to be accepting when you fail to get what you want, and the second is the passage of time between offense and forgiveness.⁸² Learning to accept the situation when our expectations aren’t met helps us realize that what we expect might be unrealistic. Learning to accept the situation is being open to a broader view of what might happen in a situation. The passage of time is related to the old expression is that time heals all wounds. This is a cliché and not true that time heals all wounds, but time does help give us a different perspective on an event.

⁷⁷ Tucker, “Defining Forgiveness,” 19-20.

⁷⁸ Barry, *The Forgiveness Project*, 14.

⁷⁹ Barry, *The Forgiveness Project*, 15.

⁸⁰ Luskin, *Forgive for Love*, 14.

⁸¹ Luskin, *Forgive for Love*, 13.

⁸² Luskin, *Forgive for Love*, 14-18.

Dick Tibbits in his book, *Forgive to Live*, states his definition as, “Forgiveness is the process of reframing one’s anger and hurt from the past, with the goal of recovering one’s own peace in the present and revitalizing one’s purpose and hopes for the future.”⁸³ For Dick Tibbits, there are three phases of forgiveness and three dimensions of forgiveness. The three phases relate to time and are: handling the memories of painful things in the past, overcoming the negative emotions of the present, and freeing oneself from the hurtful past to achieve a desired future.⁸⁴ Dick Tibbits believes that forgiveness is not complete unless the past, present, and future are involved in the process. The person forgiving makes sense of the past and present to have a better future.

The three dimensions are: relational forgiveness (what happens in the relationship between two people), spiritual forgiveness (used in a religious context or finding purpose and meaning in life), and personal forgiveness (facilitating therapeutic and healing of an individual).⁸⁵ The process of forgiveness may move at different rates in the three dimensions, and if the person who is forgiving gets stuck in one of the three dimensions, process can still be made in at least one of the other two areas.

Just like the definitions vary across the field and the research to be completed, the studies vary. I will start with a few studies. Many of the studies use physical measures of blood pressure, heart rate, and brain activity. In addition to taking these physical measures, these studies involve having the participant in the study self-report their feelings or their physical reactions. Some of the studies include factors in religious experience or cultural norms.

⁸³ Tibbits, *Forgive to Live*, 6.

⁸⁴ Tibbits, *Forgive to Live*, 6.

⁸⁵ Tibbits, *Forgive to Live*, 7-8.

Kathryn Lawler-Row conducted experiments on how forgiveness affected blood pressure and heart rate. After being connected to physical devices to measure blood pressure and heart rate, each person was asked to remember a time when someone had hurt them and to tell the story of that experience. A few people had trouble remembering any event where they had been offended.

In every case, when the person told their story of being hurt, their blood pressure went up. No matter how many years it had been since the original event, the person showed physical signs that their emotions were still activated. Our memories store not only the story of what happened, but also the emotions connected with the story. Our interpretation of the event ties our emotions to the event.

In the Kathryn Lawler-Row study, the key to how forgiveness was incorporated in the person's experience was not the initial elevation of heart rate and blood pressure, but how long the blood pressure stayed elevated. Those people, who had forgiven the offender, saw their blood pressure go down more quickly than those who were unforgiving.⁸⁶ Since high blood pressure can lead to stroke or heart disease and forgiveness can lower blood pressure, it seems healthy to learn to forgive.

Kathryn Lawler-Row found that in general as people age, they are more forgiving with each decade. She also found that usually women are more forgiving than men, and men are more forgiving in a specific situation, but not across as many circumstances.⁸⁷

My work with the Myers Briggs Preference Indicator may lend some light to this finding.⁸⁸ One of the preference indicators in the Myers Briggs is how you make decisions. One

⁸⁶ Dobbmeier, *The Power of Forgiveness*.

⁸⁷ Dobbmeier, *The Power of Forgiveness*.

style in this preference is making decisions by logic. The other style in this preference is making decisions based on how it affects relationships and people. Of the four preference indicators (how you take in data, how you process data, how you make decisions, and how you like to live your life), how you make decisions is the only preference indicator in the Myers Briggs Type Indicator that shows a gender difference. Men are generally more likely to make decisions by logic and women are more likely to make decisions based on relationships. Therefore, women are more likely to forgive because of the effect on their relationships. Men are more likely to treat a specific offense unemotionally (logically) so it is easier to release a specific hurt.

Dick Tibbits says recent research “links anger, blame, hostility, and resentment with negative health outcomes, and coronary heart disease is especially linked with unforgiving responses.”⁸⁹ An eight week study on forgiveness was developed where people attended each week and learned new topics related to forgiveness. The first week was about the mind and body connection and the effect of thoughts on physiology. Successive weeks dealt with visualization to change thoughts, anger, and the effects of not forgiving. The final week dealt with maintaining forgiveness as a way of life.⁹⁰ The result of this study showed a decrease in anger expression and a slight reduction in blood pressure readings. Tibbits states that these conclusions can’t be generalized because the number of people in the study was small, but this study can lay a foundation for a standardized study for forgiveness training.⁹¹

⁸⁸ The Myers Briggs Type Indicator is a self-reporting questionnaire to indicate how people perceive the world and make decisions. The questionnaire was developed by Katherine Cook Briggs and her daughter Isabell Briggs Meyers based on the work by Carl Jung. I became certified in administering and interpreting the Myers Briggs Type Indicator in 2006 and use the tool in small group leadership and communications and with couples in pre-marital counseling.

⁸⁹ Tibbits, *Forgive to Live*, 217.

⁹⁰ Tibbits, *Forgive to Live*, 219.

⁹¹ Tibbits, *Forgive to Live*, 221-226.

Michael Barry works at Cancer Treatment Centers of America. He studied the question of whether there is a link between forgiveness and cancer. He used educational forgiveness programs of cancer patients to study the question.⁹² He comments that some of the participants in the studies die from the cancer, and so the results are difficult to interpret. Barry found that when patients held on to the hurt from an event, the pain or anger increased stress and was linked to negative effects on their health. Stress and particularly chronic stress was linked to a negative influence on health. Michael Barry worked with patients to discover how they could forgive. Instead of a step by step program or a meditation program, he found that some insight discovered by a patient provided the key to being able to forgive. The insight was not the same for each patient, but something distinct for each patient. Some of those insights include understanding fairness, or learning to have empathy, or connecting to God through prayer.⁹³ Once the person discovered their key to forgiveness, there was no process needed, and forgiveness happened quickly.

Some of the studies have concentrated on mental health. The book *Forgiveness and Health* is a compilation of research on a number of health issues over the last ten years. In the chapter, "Forgiveness and Mental Health," unforgiveness is found to cause a stress reaction and leads to poor mental health, and forgiveness can be a coping strategy for improved mental health. The authors note that individual differences, such as age, can moderate the effects of forgiveness on mental health. One of the age related differences they found is that improved mental health with forgiveness was more significant in middle and older aged people than in younger adults.⁹⁴

⁹² Barry, *The Forgiveness Project*, 13.

⁹³ Barry, *The Forgiveness Project*, 34.

⁹⁴ Brandon J. Griffin, Everett L. Worthington, Jr., Caroline R. Lavelock, Nathaniel G. Wade, and William T. Hoyt, "Forgiveness and Mental Health," in *Forgiveness and Health*, ed. Toussaint, Worthington, Williams, 77-85.

This would be consistent with the research of Kathryn Lawler-Row who found that in general people are more forgiving with each passing decade.

Initially the question being asked by researchers was “Is forgiveness an effective predictor of mental health outcomes?”⁹⁵ The authors believe that the research to date has been able to show that forgiveness is an effective predictor of mental health. Thus, the research has taken a step forward, and the question being asked today in research is “Why is forgiveness a successful coping strategy?”⁹⁶

Robert D. Enright deals with our emotional life in his book *Forgiveness is a Choice*. Forgiving begins with admitting that we feel pain and acknowledging that we have a right to our feelings. We admit that what happened was unfair, and that we have a right to be angry. We also have a right to respect, and the offense shows a lack of respect for us by the person offending us. Forgiveness requires us to give up our feelings of anger and resentment. Because we have a right to these feelings, Enright says, forgiveness is difficult.⁹⁷

When a person forgives, anger is handled in more appropriate ways, and one study found that the feeling of fear was reduced. The hypothesis is that the reduction in fear is related to the feeling of guilt. Many people feel guilty about being angry with the person who hurt them. Forgiving lessens the guilt and thus lowers the fear.⁹⁸

It is clear that the research into the effect of forgiveness on health is in its early stages. In the next twenty years, results will give us new insights into how our health is affected by forgiveness.

⁹⁵ Griffin, “Forgiveness and Mental Health,” 86.

⁹⁶ Griffin, “Forgiveness and Mental Health,” 87.

⁹⁷ Robert D. Enright, *Forgiveness is a Choice* (Washington, DC: APA Life Tools, American Psychological Association, 2013), 25.

⁹⁸ Enright, *Forgiveness as a Choice*, 15.

Methods of Forgiveness

Once we decide to forgive, the question we ask is “How do I forgive?” This chapter presents one way to practice forgiveness that will be used in the small group study. A couple of alternative methods of forgiveness will be briefly presented here.

The steps presented here are based on *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and our World* by Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu.⁹⁹ In particular, the third step as described in this book is enhanced to give more details for how to accomplish this step. Desmond Tutu says that this book was written as a response to two questions. One question he was frequently asked was what had he learned about forgiveness from his experience with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The other question that was many times unspoken is “How do we forgive?”¹⁰⁰ The steps of telling the story, naming the hurt, granting forgiveness, and reconciling or releasing the relationship are explained in the chapters in this book. In addition to the steps, Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu give voice to two concepts. First, “there is nothing that cannot be forgiven,” and second, “there is no one undeserving of forgiveness.”¹⁰¹

As you might imagine from the title of the book, there are four steps to forgiving and healing. The first step is telling the story.¹⁰² We all experience hurt and pain. If we live we can’t avoid hurt and pain. The event that is the subject of the story has left us hurt, or sad, or angry. Most of our deep wounds leave us with the hurt or anger for months or years. Sometimes we bury the hurt or anger to avoid dealing with it. When we are honest, the hurts and pain make us doubt who we are and damage our dignity.

⁹⁹ Tutu and Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving*.

¹⁰⁰ Tutu and Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving*, 2-3.

¹⁰¹ Tutu and Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving*, 3.

¹⁰² Tutu and Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving*, 67-92.

Telling our story seems like an easy thing to do. We tell stories about all sorts of things and so telling the story of what hurt us and how it happened might seem like a natural thing to do.

In reality sometimes we are hesitant to tell our story. Sometimes we keep quiet because we feel what happened is our fault. Sometimes we don't think other people will believe us. Sometimes we bury the story and think that we have forgotten it. If we have buried the hurt and pain, it may lay dormant, but it is not forgotten by our conscious and/or unconscious mind. Sometimes we don't feel we have a safe place to tell our story. For example, in the last year many women who have never told their story about sexual harassment and sexual assault have come forward and told their stories. Some of the stories happened years ago, and it is only now that these women have felt safe enough to come forward.

To be able to find healing it is important to be able to tell the story because the story helps us to uncover the meaning we assign to the experience. When we don't tell the story, we keep remembering the event that caused hurt and pain, and as we remember the event we place our own interpretation of the event. The event begins to control us by keeping our mind and feelings reliving the event. Without telling our story the hurt and pain and the loss of our dignity keep getting damaged every time we remember the event. Our mental health and emotional health can become affected, and without some relief, eventually our physical health is impacted. We may lose sleep, have headaches, or develop more serious problems.

To be free from these hurts and pains we need to tell our story. If you have ever noticed when a tragedy happens, therapists are brought in so that the people involved can talk to someone. When a family member dies, the family members are encouraged to join a grief

support group to share their story with others. Talking about what has happened is the way to begin the forgiveness and healing process.

One reason we need to tell the story of what has happened is because by telling the story the event loosens its grip on us. By telling our story we no longer have a secret. By telling our story we get our dignity back. When we tell our stories we are saying, “This horrible thing has happened. I can’t go back and change it, but I refuse to stay in the past forever.” Forgiveness means giving up all hope for a better past.

We can decide who to tell the story to and when to tell the story. We don’t have to tell the story to everyone we meet or broadcast the event on social media. We do need to decide that there is a safe place and a safe person who can hear our story. Forgiveness can’t happen unless we tell our story.

The second step is to name the hurt.¹⁰³ This is the step where you move beyond the facts of what happened and express your feelings. We need to give voice to the pain so that forgiveness and healing can begin. Now some might think there is not any difference between telling the story and naming the hurt. This step differs from telling the story because the hurt is located in our emotions. So, in telling the story we might say that when someone said something to hurt us, we were sad or the act of the person was wrong. This step asks that you go below saying that you were hurt. What were your emotions? Were you fearful? Did you feel betrayed? Were you hurt because you were angry at what happened to you? Did you feel abandoned or rejected? Were you sad and felt like you had no control over the situation? There are many feelings that are below hurt and pain, and this step asked you to go deep and look at the feelings you are experiencing.

¹⁰³ Tutu and Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving*, 93-117.

Sometimes it may seem easier or safer to simply dismiss a hurt, stuff it down, rationalize that we shouldn't feel this way, or pretend it didn't happen. The problem is that the hurt and the pain will not go away unless we name the hurt. Whatever feeling you have is ok. No feeling is wrong.

I've heard people say, "If I don't mention it, I don't have to deal with it." Pain and hurt are like grief and loss. We always have to deal with the pain and hurt before we can be healed and become whole again. When we have named our hurts, we move out of pretending that the event never happened or that we don't want to remember the event. In other words we move out of denial. Denial protects us from remembering the pain and the hurt.

This step is particularly challenging to people who haven't learned that it is ok to express emotions. Our culture is task oriented and many people get uncomfortable when others express their emotions. Forgiveness requires that we live in our heads and our hearts. We tell our story from our minds, and we share our emotions from our heart.

The third step is to grant forgiveness.¹⁰⁴ We choose forgiveness because forgiveness is how we find freedom and keep from remaining trapped in telling our story and naming our hurts again and again. Now something that I have learned for me personally is that when I choose to forgive, I can't do it alone. I need God's love and God's grace to extend me the strength to forgive.

The third step is to keep progressing to the point of forgiveness. When we make the decision to forgive we can't do it alone. Our forgiving is ultimately a gift of grace from God. God prompts us to receive this divine gift. It is not easy to forgive, and it is with God's help that we can forgive.

¹⁰⁴Tutu and Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving*, 119-143.

The methods of this step of forgiveness can vary. Prayer is an important part of any variation in this step. For some people prayer is not only important, but the heart of the practice of forgiveness. Praying for forgiveness is not about changing what has happened, or changing the other person. Our prayer is about opening our heart and changing our interpretation of the event. My prayer for one person who had hurt me was, “God I know you love this person. Please help me see something you love about this person.” This prayer was to open my heart to experiencing something other than the hurt I had felt. (I had to pray this prayer for several months before I began to experience a softening of my heart.)

This step is the place we usually stay in for weeks, or months, or years. Michael Barry’s experience was that once a person found an insight that spoke to them, forgiveness followed quickly. My experience is that the majority of people do a lot of praying, a lot of reflecting, and a lot of experiencing their feelings before their hearts are open and forgiveness can be given.

In this step it may be necessary to go back to telling our story and naming our emotions. As in grief and loss, sometimes the most important activity in the forgiveness process is to tell our story many times. Telling the story and feeling the hurt doesn’t happen one time and the process is complete. The reason this is called a process is because it takes repetitive action for a few times or for many times.

For some people it helps to remember how God forgives us and apply that process to people who have hurt us. In the book of Colossians Paul tells us that we need to forgive others as Christ has forgiven us.¹⁰⁵ God is a loving and forgiving God and we are called to share these same characteristics. Additionally, as mentioned before, in the Lord’s Prayer we ask God to

¹⁰⁵ Colossians 3:13-15 (NRSV).

forgive us as we forgive others. If we want God's forgiveness, then we need to practice our forgiveness of others.

I want to share my method of how I found forgiveness with my parents. First, I prayed many days and months and years. I prayed for understanding. As I prayed those many months I noticed that my anger began to turn to sadness. I was sad that my dad was a victim of the disease of alcoholism. Alcoholism is as much of a disease as cancer. I was sad that my dad could not get help with the disease. I was sad for my mother. I was sad because she had a love-hate relationship with my dad and rather than confront my dad directly, it was easier to take that out her anger on me, a child. I was sad because if she had lived a generation later she might have gotten help through counseling. In my sadness I realized that I had begun to have compassion for my parents. I realized that they were doing the best job they could do. I had begun the long process of forgiving and healing.

Our forgiving is ultimately a gift of grace from God. God prompts us to receive this divine gift. We set out on a journey of the heart toward forgiveness with God. I set out to forgive my parents with God's grace. My journey took years. Daily I would pray that God would soften my heart so that I could forgive my parents. Journeys of forgiveness can take months or years. Forgiveness is not a quick fix. It is difficult work and it takes a long time. Forgiveness and healing free us from the past and allow us to grow to be the people God wants us to be.

And once we have forgiven, we have a new story to tell. The facts of the hurt we experienced haven't changed, but our interpretation has changed. The story will almost always now include something about the story of the person who hurt us. We can tell the new story because we have released the pain of the hurt of the past.

The fourth and final step in forgiveness is another choice.¹⁰⁶ We must decide whether to reconcile with the person who has harmed us or to release the relationship. It is important that this step to reconcile or release is only made after we have forgiven. After the hurt if we just avoid the person we might want to think that is releasing the relationship, but it is not. If we avoid the person, we are pretending the hurt didn't happen. It is only after going through the process of forgiving that we can make the choice to reconcile or release the relationship thoughtfully.

The steps presented here are not the only steps in other methods of the process of forgiveness. I have found that these steps are the most practical I have tried or seen work with other people. In this process the steps are interlinked. We may feel that one step is finished and we start the next step. Then we realize that we need to go back to a previous step and repeat it. That's why forgiveness is a process to be repeated as many times as necessary.

I want to mention two other methods of forgiveness that might appeal to some people. Iyanla Vanzant offers a method of forgiveness in the book *Forgiveness: 21 Days to Forgive Everyone for Everything*. "Forgiveness" Iyanla Vanzant says, "addresses how we think and feel about others and ourselves and how these thoughts manifest within our lives as energy."¹⁰⁷ Our feelings are determined by our thoughts, and so we need to train our minds for positive thoughts. Forgiveness is about changing our thoughts about events that have happened in our lives.

¹⁰⁶ Tutu and Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving*, 145-162.

¹⁰⁷ Iyanla Vanzant, *Forgiveness: 21 Days to Forgive Everyone for Everything* (Carlsbad, CA: A Smiley Books, 2017), 3.

Iyanla Vanzant compares the training we need to do with the training of a puppy. A puppy needs to be trained to good behavior. Likewise, our minds (and thoughts) need to be trained. To accomplish this training we need meditation and forgiveness.¹⁰⁸

Iyanla Vanzant gives twenty-one days of practice to train and learn the skill of forgiveness. Each day begins with an object of forgiveness. For example, Day One is I forgive myself, Day Five is I forgive my father, and Day Fifteen is I forgive my brother/sister. Each day there is a short write up, a list of daily forgiveness process reminders, a prayer of forgiveness, and journal work.¹⁰⁹

To follow this process requires some significant amount of time each day. Forgiveness does take time and effort. However, in my experience for any significant hurt we have suffered, 21 days isn't sufficient time to complete the process. Many times our hurts and wounds are deeply ingrained in us and take months or even years to heal and come to a place of forgiveness.

Finally, one other approach is from Luc Bodin, Nathalie Bodin Lamboy, and Jean Graciet in the book *The Book of Ho'oponopono: The Hawaiian Practice of Forgiving and Healing*. Key to this approach is the phrase "Ho'oponopono." This phrase is "I'm sorry, forgive me, thank you, I love you."¹¹⁰ "I'm sorry is acknowledgment that I created whatever pain I've caused or errors I've made. Forgive me because I did not know I had that inside me. Thank you for allowing me to release and cleanse the memory. I love you, my inner divinity meaning I love me."¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Vanzant, *Forgiveness: 21 Days*, 5.

¹⁰⁹ Vanzant, *Forgiveness: 21 Days*, 35-319.

¹¹⁰ Luc Bodin, Nathalie Bodin Lamboy, Jean Graciet, *The Book of Ho'oponopono: The Hawaiian Practice of Forgiving and Healing* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Publishing, 2012), ix.

¹¹¹ Bodin, *The Book of Ho'oponopono*, ix.

This approach starts with the assumption that everything that happens to us is our responsibility. We have created the setting and environment that our divine self needs. In this approach whenever you are distressed or in a conflict you repeat this phrase. You can say the phrase out loud or quietly to yourself. There is nothing that is needed for forgiveness other than repeating this phrase.

I think the expression is valuable. However, I find it difficult to believe that without any work hurts can be healed and forgiveness can be accomplished.

Self-forgiveness

Adam Hamilton tells the story of one person in his congregation talking about forgiveness: “I struggle almost daily. I can see how God works in other’s lives, but in my own, I struggle. I know that God loves me no matter what I’ve done or been in my life, but to really feel it at the core of my being, I struggle”¹¹²

This person speaks for many of us who struggle with forgiving ourselves. If we have trouble believing that God forgives us, how can we possibly forgive ourselves? And even when we believe that God has forgiven us, we still struggle with how we could forgive ourselves. We have high expectations of ourselves, and we don’t feel we should make a mistake. We play the “if only” script in our heads. If only I had not yelled at that person, if only I had been paying attention when I was driving, if only... and you can fill in the rest of the sentence.

These high expectations lead us to believe there are times when we don’t feel we deserve to be forgiven. In many cases we forgive another person for the hurt we feel, and we still can’t forgive ourselves for the part we played in the event. It is important to learn to forgive ourselves. Jesus forgives others, and I believe that Jesus would want us to forgive ourselves since Jesus forgives us.

It is important to forgive ourselves, not only for theological reasons, but also for our health. Dick Tibbits says in his book, *Forgive to Live*, that forgiving ourselves is essential. “Suicide, eating disorders, substance abuse, and depression all are linked to the inability to forgive oneself.”¹¹³ The reasons for forgiving ourselves are to avoid the physical and mental problems given by Dick Tibbits, and also to release us from the hurts and wounds of the past.

¹¹² Hamilton, *Forgiveness*, 22.

¹¹³ Tibbits, *Forgive to Live*, 187.

There are other views on forgiving ourselves. Stephen Cherry in his chapter “Uses and Abuses of Self-Forgiveness” in the book *Forgiveness in Practice*, says that self-forgiveness is not like God’s forgiveness or interpersonal forgiveness. We are not God, so we can’t forgive ourselves as God would forgive us. In addition, if we think about forgiveness in the traditional sense between individuals, there is an offender and a victim. Stephen Cherry says that if we talk about self-forgiveness, then we must be our own victim.¹¹⁴

In a sense, Stephen Cherry is correct. We tell ourselves a message that we are guilty of some wrong and so tell ourselves that we are a victim of our own wrongdoing. Dick Tibbits counters Cherry when he says that not forgiving ourselves is a form of pride. We hold ourselves to a higher set of standards than we hold other people, and that is a form of pride.¹¹⁵ For example, if we forgive other people for being late to a meeting, then we need to forgive ourselves for being late. We might instead tell ourselves that we should have planned better to be on time or allowed more time for the traffic we encountered. Sometimes we even decide that our mistake is habitual; we are always late.

Stephen Curry points to another issue with self-forgiveness. We have self-knowledge, but our self-knowledge may be faulty. Stephen Curry says, “Self-knowledge is famously difficult to achieve, and by its nature it is impossible to calibrate, especially negative self-knowledge.”¹¹⁶

Stephen Cherry says maybe a better term would be self-acceptance.¹¹⁷ For some event, we can’t find peace with what we have done. Since we aren’t God and can’t forgive ourselves, we need to learn to accept what we have done to lessen the pain and find peace. Stephen Curry

¹¹⁴ Cherry, “Uses and Abuses of Self-Forgiveness” 71.

¹¹⁵ Tibbits, *Forgive to Live*, 187.

¹¹⁶ Cherry, “Uses and Abuses of Self-Forgiveness” 71.

¹¹⁷ Cherry, “Uses and Abuses of Self-Forgiveness” 72.

gives two reasons for the lack of peace. He says that we can't accept that God forgives us, or that the person we have wronged forgives us. The other reason is the person doesn't believe in God and the person whom they offender has died, so can't offer forgiveness.¹¹⁸

When we speak of forgiving ourselves, there are two terms that are important to understand. These two terms are guilt and shame. Guilt is feeling bad about something we did. There is legitimate guilt because of something we said or did to hurt another person. We might feel guilty because of that word we said to a close family member, or those angry words we used with a co-worker. If we could take it back we would. We might also feel guilty because some act we did that hurt another person. Perhaps we walked away when a family member was trying to talk to us. Perhaps we took a sweater to wear thinking we were borrowing this sweater and the sweater got permanently stained. These are examples of legitimate guilt.

There is also illegitimate guilt. We may also feel guilty because of learning family or cultural norms that we are supposed to feel guilty. A family member tells us that we should have acted a certain way and that we feel guilty because we didn't act that way. A therapist that I was seeing many years ago told me that no one can make us feel guilty. Feeling guilty is something we do to ourselves. We feel guilty because of listening to someone else instead of trusting ourselves. One woman recently told me she felt guilty because she should have gone to see her sister more often. Whenever we tell ourselves that we "should" have done something, we need to reflect on whether that guilt is legitimate or illegitimate.

Shame is feeling bad about who we are. We turn guilt for an action into shame about always acting the same way. For example, if we fail a test in school we tell ourselves that it is because we are stupid. If we become angry and lash out at someone, it is because we are a cold

¹¹⁸ Cherry, "Uses and Abuses of Self-Forgiveness," 72-73.

and unkind person. We draw the conclusion that we are not a good person and we feel shame. We learn to believe that we can't change our actions because our characteristics are flawed.

I have mentioned that my dad was alcoholic. In many cases with an alcoholic member of a family, a shame based system is created in the family. As a child and a teenager, I felt the problems in my home were my fault. I was causing the problems because of who I was. I heard messages from my parents about how selfish I was, about how unlikeable I was, and about how I didn't deserve anything good ever happening. I believed that if only I could correct these traits, my home would be peaceful instead of chaotic.

I learned as an adult that I was experiencing shame. It was a difficult message to hear and absorb. I had to learn other lessons to counter the feelings of shame that I had. I learned that we all are children of God and we all deserve dignity and respect. Every one of us is a loving, kind, and compassionate person at our core. It was difficult to understand or believe that the messages that my parents told me were not true. Therefore, I learned as an adult we deserve to be forgiven and we deserve to forgive ourselves.

The same definition used earlier applies to self-forgiveness. *Forgiveness is the elimination of all desire for revenge and personal ill will toward those who have wronged us. Forgiveness is an inner peace of heart and the freedom of not having our lives defined by the injuries we have suffered.*

In the case of self-forgiveness we are harming ourselves by holding onto the guilt, whether legitimate or not, or blaming ourselves for who we are. Choosing to forgive ourselves and going through the process of forgiveness is how we free ourselves from the hurt and from the past. We release the pain we are feeling. If we are guilty of something we said or did, we

can acknowledge the mistake we made, apologize to the person we hurt if they are available, learn from the mistake, and move on. Forgiving ourselves is how we heal and grow.

The steps of self-forgiveness are the same as for forgiving others. The process can take weeks, months, or years to complete. We need to choose to forgive ourselves and enter the process of forgiveness. We tell the story of what has happened, name the emotions we have felt, forgive with God's help, and in this case, we want to reconcile with ourselves.

Self-forgiveness requires absolute truth. We face the wrongs we have done and we admit that we are flawed individuals in need of forgiveness. Self-forgiveness requires humility and hard work. It is with humility that we admit we are not perfect and that sometimes we set our standards for perfection. Self-forgiveness is true self-acceptance of who we are. When we can accept who we are we can have love and compassion for ourselves.

As we process what has happened and name the emotions that we are having, we come to the step of forgiving. We share with ourselves and with God that we are in need of forgiveness. We use prayer and meditation and other spiritual practices to communicate with God. We understand that God allows us to remember the past, and not be captive to the past. We come to the realization that God has forgiven us, and so we can forgive ourselves.

Forgiving ourselves is how we make meaning out of our suffering, restore our self-compassion, and tell a new story of who we are. We understand that the meaning we had assigned to the event caused us to blame ourselves, feel guilt or shame, and hold on to the hurt and wound. The new story that we tell releases us from the blame, guilt and shame to know that we are loved by God, supported by God, and created to be compassionate and kind. As we forgive ourselves, we have internal peace.

Fred Luskin says, “When you forgive yourself, you look for your good qualities, appreciate the love you offer, and accept with humility the harm you cause.”¹¹⁹ Forgiveness is something you do for yourself to feel the healing from the wounds of the past.

As I mentioned earlier, I learned as an adult that I had grown up in a shame based system. One of the things I learned as a child was that if I paid any attention to myself I was considered selfish. The messages of childhood are with us for many years. Since self-forgiveness requires examining yourself, I struggled with self-forgiveness. Through God’s help and the help of therapists and other spiritual friends, I learned that the messages I had received as a child were not valid, and instead I was a beloved child of God.

Two things were instrumental in my learning about self-forgiveness. First, I worked with two therapists through the course of about fifteen years. Both of these therapists helped me understand the shame-based system I had grown up in. Both of these therapists helped me understand that the messages I had received were not true.

The second image that was instrumental in learning about self-forgiveness was who I believed God was. I grew up believing in a judgmental God. I believed that God viewed me the same way my parents did; as a selfish, unlikable and unlovable person. I learned that God was a God of love and loved me unconditionally.

I listened to a tape years ago that defined unconditional love. There is nothing you can do that will make God love you more and there is nothing you can do that will make God love you less.¹²⁰ This new view of who God is helped me learn to forgive myself and be able to tell a new

¹¹⁹ Luskin, *Forgive for Love*, 210.

¹²⁰ The tape I listened to was so long ago that I have no memory whose tape it was or even where I heard it. This definition of unconditional love has stuck with me ever since.

story; that I was a child of God and a person who was compassionate and kind at my core. That led me to learn that I could forgive myself.

Implications of forgiveness to the community and to the world

This paper has dealt primarily with interpersonal forgiveness. When we forgive someone who has hurt us, we release our pain associated with that hurt. Forgiveness is something we do for ourselves so that we can experience healing, and focus on the present and let go of the past. When we learn to forgive, we understand that forgiveness is not dependent on the person who wounded us apologizing to us, because we can release the pain without that apology.

This chapter goes beyond interpersonal forgiveness and looks at some of the impact on our families, other people, our communities, our nations, and the world. The importance of expanding forgiveness to others, communities, nations, and the global people should not be minimized.

Even when we think forgiveness is only between two people, the event and the practice of forgiveness affects people around us. For example, if a dispute happens between two family members, it is usual that other members of the family are directly or indirectly involved.

I remember when my mother and my aunt had an argument about a family reunion. My aunt thought my parents were spending the night at her house. My mother had made a hotel reservation. When my parents arrived at the reunion and my aunt found out my parents were staying in a hotel instead of staying with her, an argument broke out. My mother and my aunt never spoke to one another again. I and other members of the family had difficulty in communicating with both my aunt and my mother. We were supposed to take sides and support either my mother or my aunt.

Another look at how forgiveness affects families is by Honor Rhodes who writes a chapter called, “Families, Forgiving and Withholding Forgiveness: Meaning and Family Process” within the book *Forgiveness in Practice*. Honor Rhodes works with families, including families where issues of guilt and a desire for forgiveness were at the core of the troubles the

family faced. Communications with these families were distorted by family secrets and lies.

Honor Rhodes found that in exploring genograms with families where disappearances or severed communications were found in the genogram, discussing whether unforgiveness was a factor in the breaks in family history was helpful.¹²¹

Honor Rhodes also notes that sometimes the practice of forgiveness is problematic in families. She notes that when parents tell children to say “I’m sorry” and then to “play nicely” true forgiveness is not accomplished. Children learn that forgiveness is a ritual to be carried out without addressing the incident that caused the hurt.¹²² In addition, forgiveness is problematic when forgiveness is required multiple times when abuse is the ongoing pattern.¹²³ Honor Rhodes admits that forgiveness can be helpful when the forgiveness is not forced, deals with the emotions of the victim, and is authentic forgiveness.¹²⁴

Beyond families we can look at communities. Communities may be our local churches, geographic neighbors, and communities formed around an interest. Communities hold common values and usually support one another in times of need. We are all part of multiple communities, and in those communities we deal with people who we get along with very well, and people who annoy or irritate us. We encounter conflict within these communities, and the practice of forgiveness helps bring peace and harmony within the community.

Henri Nouwen reminds us about forgiveness in the broader community. “There is so much forgiving to do. We have to forgive our parents for not being able to give us unconditional love, our brothers and sisters for not giving us the support we dreamed about, our friends for not

¹²¹ Honor Rhodes, “Families, Forgiving and Withholding Forgiveness: Meaning and Family Process,” in *Forgiveness in Practice*, ed. Stephen Hance, (London, UK: Jessica Kingsley Publishing, 2019), 148.

¹²² Rhodes, “Families, Forgiving, and Withholding Forgiveness,” 147-148.

¹²³ Rhodes, “Families, Forgiving, and Withholding Forgiveness,” 150.

¹²⁴ Rhodes, “Families, Forgiving, and Withholding Forgiveness,” 151.

being there for us when we expected them. We have to forgive our church and civil leaders for their ambitions and manipulations. Beyond all that we have to forgive all those who torture, kill, rape, destroy – who make the world such a dark place.”¹²⁵

The idea of forgiveness within community goes back centuries. In the Hebrew Bible the community was to care for widows and orphans, the most vulnerable in the community.¹²⁶ The story of Hagar and Ishmael running away from Abraham’s tent put them in grave danger. Being separated from their community was to make their life difficult if not impossible.¹²⁷ Life was to be lived in community and lived in harmony. While forgiveness was not explicitly stated, forgiveness is necessary for any community to live in harmony.

In the New Testament, Paul writes letters to several communities. Paul was concerned with how the people in the communities treated each other behaviorally. While Paul doesn’t give any extended treatment of forgiveness, he does write to communities about forgiveness. To the Corinthians he writes that they should forgive the one who has caused pain to the community. If the community forgives the offender, Paul will forgive the person for the sake of the community and the sake of Christ.¹²⁸

To the Ephesians, Paul writes that the community should put away slander, wrath, and anger and instead be tenderhearted, kind, and forgive one another.¹²⁹ For Paul the harmony of the community is dependent of forgiveness among other things.

In the movie, *The Power of Forgiveness* Robert Enright goes to Northern Ireland where the injustice and violence between the Protestants and the Catholics have left anger and pain on

¹²⁵ Henri Nouwen, *The Only Necessary Thing: Living a Prayerful Life* (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 1999), 153.

¹²⁶ Isaiah 10:1-3 (NRSV).

¹²⁷ Genesis 14 (NRSV).

¹²⁸ 2 Corinthians 2:7-10 (NRSV).

¹²⁹ Ephesians 4:31-32 (NRSV).

both sides.¹³⁰ A peace agreement was signed in 1998, twenty years ago, and while some of the violence has subsided, the tension is still present, and the Protestants and Catholics live segregated lives. A shooting in 1973 that left 6 young Catholic men dead is still remembered decades after the shooting. Relatives who lost a loved one have carried the memory and don't want to think about forgiveness until the other side has admitted guilt and asked for forgiveness.¹³¹

In Northern Ireland Protestants and Catholics go to different schools and carry different identities as the community continues to be segregated. The community suffers from the memory of the pain and violence and has trouble moving forward by reliving the past. Forgiveness would offer an alternative to continuing the current situation.

Robert Enright developed a curriculum for primary schools (the equivalent of our elementary schools) on forgiveness. The curriculum says that all people have worth because they are members of the human family. The long term approach was to start with children in the hope that as the children became adults they would have more compassion and less anger would be present in the community. The hope was that the children would grow up to be tough minded and tender hearted.¹³²

Another example from the movie *The Power of Forgiveness* is the episode with the Amish in Pennsylvania. On October 2, 2006 Charles Roberts killed five girls and wounded five others before turning the gun on himself and committing suicide. The Amish community

¹³⁰ Dobbmeier, *The Power of Forgiveness*.

¹³¹ Dobbmeier, *The Power of Forgiveness*.

¹³² Dobbmeier, *The Power of Forgiveness*.

practiced forgiveness. The Amish went to talk to the Roberts family to make sure the Roberts family knew that the Amish community forgave the shooter and his family.¹³³

The Amish don't teach forgiveness in a formal way, but they demonstrate it in the way they live their lives. The children learn the Lord's Prayer very early in their lives, and the children see forgiveness practiced daily in the community. The community has learned to absorb tragedy and not get angry with God. Retribution is not part of the vocabulary of the Amish. The community supports one another in the practice of forgiveness no matter what happens.¹³⁴

Probably the most well-known example of dealing with forgiveness on a national scale is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Desmond Tutu tells the story of the Commission in his book, *No Future without Forgiveness*.

When apartheid ended, the country had to decide how to deal with the events that had happened and the hurts and wounds on the people of the country. Desmond Tutu writes, "A nation divided during a repressive regime does not emerge suddenly united when the time of repression has passed."¹³⁵ He continues that there was a need to balance the requirement of justice, accountability, and stability, with peace, and reconciliation. He realized that if South Africa used retributive justice, South Africa would have been a country lying in ashes.¹³⁶ Another approach was needed.

A Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established. One of the reasons that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was successful was because of the underlying values held by the people of South Africa. An African idiom says, "A person is a person through other

¹³³ Dobbmeier, *The Power of Forgiveness*.

¹³⁴ Dobbmeier, *The Power of Forgiveness*.

¹³⁵ Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, 21.

¹³⁶ Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, 23.

persons.”¹³⁷ We are all related to each other, what happens to one person is tied to the others in the community. In addition, South Africans value harmony, friendliness, and community with social harmony being considered the highest value. The people of South Africa believe that anger, resentment, lust for revenge, and even success through aggressive competitiveness are all considered corrosive of the good of the community.¹³⁸

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission met criticism from the beginning of its time. While reconciliation was the goal, many people in the country saw the Commission as a political move. Some people doubted the objectivity of the Commission. In spite of the criticism, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission proved to be a model for other countries and for other communities on how to deal with massive repression and oppression.¹³⁹ “The cycle of reprisal and counter reprisal that had characterized their national history had to be broken, and the only way to do this was to go beyond retributive justice to restorative justice, to move on to forgiveness, because without it there was no future.”¹⁴⁰ Desmond Tutu realized forgiveness was not just altruistic. Forgiveness promoted the best of self-interest by respecting the rights of every person. Desmond Tutu says, “What dehumanizes you inexorably dehumanizes me.”¹⁴¹

Another topic related to forgiveness in the community and the nation is the justice system. In most cases when an event happens that affects a community, the cry for justice is heard more frequently than the call for forgiveness. Justice and forgiveness are not mutually exclusive. Justice and forgiveness can both be experienced. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, South Africa decided that retributive justice would not heal the country, and so

¹³⁷ Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, 35.

¹³⁸ Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, 31.

¹³⁹ Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, 83.

¹⁴⁰ Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, 83.

¹⁴¹ Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, 31.

established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to use restorative justice and forgiveness as the basis of healing the country.

In this country the justice system is primarily based on retribution. However, in the last two decades there is an interest in restorative where the focus is on healing the individual and involving and healing the community as well. Michael Hadley in the book, *The Spiritual Roots of Restorative Justice* says, ‘Restorative Justice, with its principles of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation, is a deeply spiritual process...It [Restorative Justice] requires all of us to come to grips with who we are, what we have done, and what we can become in the fullness of our humanity.’¹⁴²

In the book *The Spiritual Roots of Restorative Justice* there is a chapter that illustrates community involvement in the justice system. The chapter “The Case for Aboriginal Justice and Healing: The Self Perceived through a Broken Mirror” discusses an example of an aboriginal people deciding punishment within the community.¹⁴³

The underlying principle in the community is that all things are related. The view of self is in terms of how the self is related to the wider tribe and community. Thus, in any crime, the person who committed with crime, the victim of the crime and the community are all affected.¹⁴⁴

It was acknowledged in this chapter that trauma occurred for these aboriginal peoples when Europeans arrived and imposed a new identity on the aboriginal peoples. The law of many of the aboriginal peoples had been unwritten, and these unwritten rules were replaced by the

¹⁴² Michael L. Hadley, ed., *The Spiritual Roots of Restorative Justice* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 9.

¹⁴³ Arthur W. Blue and Meredith A. Rogers Blue, “The Case for Aboriginal Justice and Healing: The Self Perceived through a Broken Mirror,” in *The Spiritual Roots of Restorative Justice*, ed. Michael L. Hadley (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 57.

¹⁴⁴ Blue, “The Case for Aboriginal Justice,” 58-66.

rules, and culture of the Europeans. With the advent of the trauma of the Europeans, confusion occurred between the two different views of law and justice.¹⁴⁵

A specific example is given of a “Sentencing Circle.” The goal of the Sentencing Circle is to restore harmony which would result from changes to multiple people within the community. People gather in this sentencing circle who have a role in the disruption (crime). The people include the person who is the offender, the victim of the disruption, and representatives of the community. Everyone acknowledges that there has been a disruption and each person speaks from their perspective. The sentencing plan involves commitments by the offender and by people within the community. The offender is forgiven by committing to some changes in behavior.¹⁴⁶

Restorative justice and forgiveness are also dealt with by Marian Liebmann in the chapter “Restorative Justice and Forgiveness” in the book *Forgiveness in Practice*. In restorative justice Marian Liebmann says it is rare that the victim can be restored. Even if monetary compensation is made, other losses such as emotional loss or trauma cannot be undone. However, the goal is to hold a dialogue between the offender and the victim to transform the crime into something different so that the offender and the victim can both experience healing.¹⁴⁷

Marian Liebmann looks at the motivation of forgiveness as to transform the person forgiving and the person who is forgiven. The person who is forgiving is released from the anger and hurt, and the cycle of violence is broken allowing the offender to experience transformation.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ Blue, “The Case for Aboriginal Justice,” 62.

¹⁴⁶ Blue, “The Case for Aboriginal Justice,” 70.

¹⁴⁷ Marian Liebmann, “Restorative Justice and Forgiveness,” in *Forgiveness in Practice*, ed. Stephen Hance (London, UK: Jessica Kingsley Publishing, 2019), 99-100.

¹⁴⁸ Liebmann, “Restorative Justice and Forgiveness,” 102.

Forgiveness is not a prerequisite in the restorative justice system, and the victim needs to decide if they are willing to forgive. Marian Liebmann offers two different responses from two victims. One victim claimed that she could not forgive because the offender went back to his life as it existed before the crime. She, on the other hand, had lost everything. The other victim claimed that he needed to forgive because both the victim and the offender were sinners in the eyes of God.¹⁴⁹ While forgiveness is not valid in every case in restorative justice, forgiveness is helpful in most cases.

As criminal justice systems move toward rehabilitation and take into account the victim's perspective, the justice system moves toward a culture of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a way to end a violent cycle and find a way to peace within a community and the broader world.

One note needed to be made here is about reconciliation. In interpersonal forgiveness we allow for the reconciliation of the relationship after forgiveness or to end the relationship after forgiveness. When we examine the practice of forgiveness within a community it seems more important to strive for reconciliation to preserve the community.

When some event happens that affects a community without forgiveness the community may be broken apart. In local churches where an event happens that is interpreted in two significantly different ways, without forgiveness the churches usually split. There are many examples of forgiveness within communities with the result that in practicing forgiveness the community becomes stronger. There are also examples of unforgiveness and communities remain in conflict or become two or more communities. Unforgiveness in communities leads to painful memories being carried into future generations.

¹⁴⁹ Liebmann, "Restorative Justice and Forgiveness," 104.

Forgiveness is the way of finding peace and compassion for others who share the world with us. Desmond Tutu says that when we realize that we are all interconnected, you know that there is no one and no event that is underserving of forgiveness. He continues that if South Africa had taken the approach of revenge under the guise of justice, South Africa would have been destroyed. As individuals taking the path of revenge hurts us spiritually, physically, and emotionally, and the same is true of nations or the global community.¹⁵⁰

Interpersonal forgiveness has effects far beyond the individual. When we forgive another person, our family, friends, and community are affected. This chapter has looked at forgiveness within families, communities, and nations. In this paper I wanted to start at an individual level with interpersonal forgiveness. As we have all heard so many times, transformation happens one person at a time. If each person can learn forgiveness, then the community will be influenced for the better by each person.

¹⁵⁰ Tutu and Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving*, 3.

Conclusion

Forgiveness is a concept taught by Jesus through his teachings and parables, and through his actions of forgiving sins and healing. Forgiveness is a practice that we can learn to release anger, pain, and wounds from the past to promote peace in our lives. All of us feel hurt sometimes and learning to forgive allows us to free ourselves from continuing to live the event that hurt us again and again. Forgiveness is not easy and takes effort, but choosing to forgive heals our wounds, helps us to grow, and assures us that we are following what Jesus asks of us.

The choice to forgive is always ours. We should never enter the process of forgiveness until we feel ready to do so. Martha Nussbaum says we may be negatively impacted if we forgive only because of religious obligation.¹⁵¹ Our Christian teaching tells us to forgive, and the scientific research tells us that forgiving us is helpful to our physical, mental, and emotional health. However, if we are not ready to forgive, we can continue to reflect and prepare to enter the process.

Fred Luskin says that once you have been hurt, you want to keep yourself safe. When you feel anger and hate, keeping yourself safe means getting revenge. When you forgive, keeping yourself safe is protecting yourself without hate.¹⁵² Carol Ann Morrow tells us, “Hurting people who hurt you may seem fair. But it really keeps the hurt going. It traps both of you inside a dark cloud of bad feelings. Forgiving opens your heart, so you let out the hurt and let love shine in.”¹⁵³

The research presented here shows the benefits of forgiveness to an individual through being able to leave the hurt in the past and to improve our health, to our families through better

¹⁵¹ Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, 72.

¹⁵² Luskin, *Forgive for Love*, 82.

¹⁵³ Carol Ann Morrow, *Forgiving is Smart for Your Heart* (St. Meinrad, IN: Abbey Press, 2003), 6.

relationships and resolving conflicts, to our communities, and to our nations through lowering the violent behavior and bringing more peace. As Christians we want to follow Jesus' commandments and one of those is forgiveness. Research also shows the benefits to our physical, mental, and emotional health. Logic would tell us that forgiveness is good, but sometimes our desire for getting even or blaming someone cause us to defer forgiveness until we are ready. Hopefully, we do decide to forgive.

Once we decide to forgive the question most frequently asked is "How do you know when you have really forgiven the person who has hurt you?" There is not a single answer for this question. For some people they know they have forgiven when they feel a huge weight is lifted. For other people it is an overwhelming sense of peace. For still others it is being able to look at the person who hurt us without feelings of anger or resentment. For some it is a combination of all of these feelings.

Forgiveness calls for each of us to learn to open our hearts and trust our hearts to know when we have forgiven. Forgiveness is a way of life; a lifelong process. Forgiveness is not easy and takes effort, but choosing to forgive heals our wounds, helps us to grow, and assures us that we are following what Jesus asks of us.

When we forgive a person or what happened in one event, we may think we are finished with forgiveness. I wish that were the case. We need to learn to live with an attitude of forgiveness. Sometimes life is unfair. The couple who plans to travel after retirement, and one of the couple dies or is disabled call for a change of plans. Travel is not an option. Who would you forgive? Would you ask God why this has happened? Would you blame the spouse who died or is disabled? Would you blame life itself? Sometimes if we have an attitude of forgiveness, we learn to forgive every day.

Finishing this project doesn't end my interest in forgiveness. I have already committed to lead a small group in the study presented here. I plan to preach on forgiveness when I have a chance. I will continue to work on forgiveness in my relationships. I will watch for anything that makes me angry.

One of the things I have noticed while working on this project is that I am giving advice to people when they explain a situation. One person was telling me the story of how he could not forgive himself, and I suggested that even if he couldn't forgive himself, God has forgiven him. When I saw this person the next day he told me that my words had not only given him comfort, but made him rethink that he might be able to forgive himself. Another person told me she felt guilty because she had said no to serving on a committee at church. She was very busy and couldn't do justice to the committee assignment. She had learned in her family that it was inappropriate to ever say no. I suggested that maybe that rule was no longer valid for her and she could forgive herself for trying to follow that old rule. She was surprised and then said, "Thank you."

Forgiveness is difficult, but well worth the effort. I invite you to join me in the choice to forgive.

Appendix:
Small Group Study

Overview

Forgiveness is important to the life of every Christian. As a church we pray the Lord's Prayer and ask God to forgive us as we forgive others. We may hear sermons on forgiveness or have participated in a study on forgiveness. We know that forgiveness is important and yet we sometimes believe that some people or some act is unforgivable. We may be uncomfortable with knowing that we should forgive, and yet we aren't ready to forgive. Forgiveness begins when we make the choice to forgive. We might ask the question of how we prepare to make that choice to forgive.

This small group study is a way to help people learn more about forgiveness. It is by learning and understanding more about forgiveness that we can prepare to forgive another person. In this study each person will be called to look more deeply at their own lives; especially those places in our lives where we need to forgive others, need to be forgiven, or need to forgive ourselves. It is my hope that by the end of the study each person participating will find a peace by using forgiveness in their own lives.

Because of the sharing that will be asked from each participant, some group norms need to be established in the first session. Confidentiality of what is shared in the group is one of the most important norms. In addition, other rules might be: not interrupting while someone else is speaking, allowing time for each person to speak, no cell phones, and arriving on time.

The process used for forgiving in this study is a four step process. In the first four weeks one step will be presented and the exercises will focus on applying that step. The participants will be asked to keep a journal with reflections on how the process of forgiveness is proceeding. In the final week a look at self-forgiveness will be examined. Since time needs to be allowed for telling stories and sharing I suggest that the group need to be limited to ten people and each session be no more than two hours.

Each session will include a scripture, written description of the week's topic, some questions to reflect on, an optional journaling exercise, and some questions for discussion. A leader's guide is included in each session with suggestions for leading the group each week. Since the participants will be asked to share something of their personal lives (and every participant can pass and not share), time needs to be spent in the first session and at the beginning of each subsequent session to build trust within the group. It would be a goal that even the participants who passed initially would share when they feel safe.

As young children we are told by parents, "Say you are sorry" and we repeat the words. This may teach us to tell someone we are sorry without healing the wound we have. In the long term we have not forgiven and we still carry the hurt and the wound.

Jesus calls us to love God and love our neighbor. It is impossible to love others if we can't learn and practice the process for forgiveness. In the five weeks of this small group study it is my hope that people will learn about forgiveness in their lives and as a result learn to love our neighbors to meet Jesus' call to us.

Session 1: What is Forgiveness?

Leaders Guide

Opening: Begin this first session with introductions. If the participants all know each other, the session can begin with asking each person to share how they define forgiveness. If the participants don't know each other each person needs to share something about their lives; such as name, how long they have attended the church (if they are attendees of the church), who is in their family, and something they would like the group to know about them. In this session establish norms (rules of behavior) that the group participants will abide by. Suggestions of norms are listed in the Overview.)

Tell the purpose of this first session. In this session we will define forgiveness and how forgiveness affects our lives. We will look at the first step in a method to forgive.

Close the opening with a prayer.

Scripture: Colossians 3:13. Read the Scripture together. Discuss what comes to mind from this verse from Paul. Questions to ask might include: is forgiveness always reciprocal? When you forgive, do you think about God forgiving you?

Discussion: Ask the participants to share an experience where they were able to forgive and an experience where they have not forgiven yet. Ask questions like how were they able to forgive? How did it feel to forgive? What caused them not to forgive? What do they remember of the event and the person whom they haven't forgiven? Do they agree with the definition or would they modify the definition?

Discussion: Ask each person in the group select a person and event to be the focus for them in this study. The first step of the forgiveness process is to tell their story. Ask each participant to tell their story. Allow participants to self-select when they share their story. If anyone is not ready to share their story, they can share next week.

Discussion: Select any questions at the end of the session and discuss.

Closing: Ensure everyone is ok. (Some of the sharing may be emotional.) If necessary, pause and use some silent meditation for a couple of minutes. Ask everyone to keep a journal with how they are doing with the process of forgiveness. Write the feelings they have, questions that come to mind, and things they want to share with the group. The journal can be on their computer, handwritten, or just notes on a tablet. Ask everyone to read the material in Session 2 before meeting again. Close with a prayer.

Participant Material

Purpose: In this session we will define forgiveness and how forgiveness affects our lives. We will look at the first step in a method to forgive.

Colossians 3:13 “Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.”

All of us know how to forgive. That may be surprising to hear. Imagine all the ways that someone hurts you or annoys you in a day or in a week. Did someone cut you off in traffic? Did a friend forget a lunch date they had made with you? Did you go to a store and the clerk was rude? Life is not always pleasant and things go wrong that annoy us, hurt us or make us angry. Even the easiest going person can’t avoid getting annoyed, hurt or angry sometimes.

Now the things mentioned here are pretty small things and we usually don’t remember for very long the person who cut us off in traffic, or the lunch date forgotten, or the rude clerk in the store. Almost every one of us forgets these minor hurts quickly and so we have forgiven the person who annoyed us.

It may be a little more difficult when our hurt or anger is from a close friend or a family member. When the hurt is a family member forgetting your birthday or a broken love relationship or when you feel betrayed by a friend it is more difficult to let go of the hurt or anger. Sometimes we hold on to the hurts and wounds we have and find ourselves thinking about the person who caused them frequently. Thinking about an event or person from the past doesn't allow us to devote that time to other things.

In order to live our lives as God intended we need to learn to let go of hurts and anger. We need to be in a state of peace and return to a state of love of our neighbor. Paul tells us in this verse that we need to forgive because Jesus Christ has forgiven us. The context of this forgiveness is in the community of the Colossians and the forgiveness is reciprocal.

We live in a culture that prizes getting even with people and seeking revenge on those who have wronged us instead of forgiving any wrong. We view justice as evening the score and we achieve success when we prove another person is wrong. Forgiveness says we have to let go of revenge and getting even with people who have hurt us or angered us. Forgiveness, then, is countercultural.

The definition of forgiveness we will use in this study is: *Forgiveness is the elimination of all desire for revenge and personal ill will toward those who have wronged us. Forgiveness is an inner peace of heart and the freedom of not having our lives defined by the injuries we have suffered.*

Now maybe you feel that there are actions that can't be forgiven. Sometimes we think that by not forgiving the person who hurts us we are making that person feel bad. However, our not forgiving probably has no impact on the other person. Sometimes the other person doesn't even know they have hurt us. Not forgiving hurts us because our hurts and anger continue to

control our thoughts and actions. Our decision making may not be free of the hurt and anger we feel. It is to our benefit that we learn and understand what forgiveness is and then practice forgiveness in our lives.

There are a few things about the definition that need to be clarified. Forgiveness is a process that we make a conscious decision to enter. It is not easy or quick. It may take years. We have the choice to enter the process or not. We can decide to begin the process to forgive or decide that this is one of those times when forgiveness isn't possible. If forgiveness isn't possible at this time, realize that forgiveness might be possible sometime in the future.

Second, forgiveness is not the same as forgetting that the injury happened. Just because we forgive doesn't change the past. Forgiving doesn't erase the event that caused our anger or hurt. Forgiveness also does not release the person from the responsibility of their actions. Forgiveness doesn't erase the consequence of the action. Justice may still need to be carried out.

In this study reflect on someone who has hurt you in the past and focus on that event. If you chose to forgive, then you enter the process of forgiveness. The initial step is always making the decision to forgive. Once we enter the process the first step is telling our story.

Telling our story seems like an easy thing to do. We tell stories about all sorts of things and so telling the story of what hurt us and how it happened might seem like a natural thing to do.

In reality sometimes we are hesitant to tell our story. Sometimes we keep quiet because we feel what happened is our fault. Sometimes we don't think other people will believe us. Sometimes we bury the story and think that we have forgotten it. If we have buried the hurt and pain, it may lay dormant, but it is not forgotten by our conscious and/or unconscious mind. Sometimes we don't feel we have a safe place to tell our story. For example, in the last year

many women who have never told their story have come forward and told stories of sexual assault that happened many years ago.

When we don't tell the story, we keep remembering the event that caused hurt and pain and as we remember the event we give our own interpretation of the event. To be able to find healing it is important to be able to tell the story because the story helps us to uncover the meaning of the experience. Without telling our story the hurt and pain and the loss of our dignity keep getting damaged every time we remember.

To be free from these hurts and pains we need to tell our story. If you have ever noticed when a tragedy happens, therapists are brought in so that the people involved can talk to someone. When a family member dies, the family members are encouraged to join a grief support group to share their story with others. Talking about what has happened is the way to begin the forgiveness and healing process.

One reason we tell the story of what has happened is because by telling the story the event loosens its grip on us. By telling our story we no longer have a secret. By telling our story we get our dignity back.

When we tell our stories we are saying, "This horrible thing has happened. I can't go back and change it, but I refuse to stay in the past forever." Forgiveness means giving up all hope for a better past.

We can decide who to tell the story to and when to tell the story. We don't have to tell the story to everyone we meet or broadcast the event on social media. We do need to decide that there is a safe place and a safe person who can hear our story. Forgiveness can't happen unless you tell your story.

This session ends with a note. It takes courage to enter the process of forgiveness. God will be with you during this process of examining your hurt and working through the steps of forgiveness. This session is the first step in a four step process. Next week we will discuss the second step and look at the reasons that we should forgive.

The Definition of Forgiveness

Forgiveness is the elimination of all desire for revenge and personal ill will toward those who have wronged us. Forgiveness is an inner peace of heart and the freedom of not having our lives defined by the injuries we have suffered.

Steps of Forgiveness

Make a decision to forgive, and tell your story.

Name the hurt.

Reach the moment when you have no more desire for revenge.

Decide whether to reconcile with the person who has harmed you or release the relationship.

Questions for Discussion

1. Are there acts that are unforgivable? If so, what are they?
2. Is it more difficult to forgive when the offender doesn't ask for forgiveness?
3. Is it more difficult when the offender keeps hurting you again?
4. What are the barriers to telling your story?
5. How does it feel to tell your story?
6. How did it feel to hear other stories? Did you hear similarities?

Session 2: Why Should We Forgive?

Leader's Guide

Opening: Begin this second session with checking in with the participants. How did it feel to reflect on forgiveness this last week? If anyone didn't get a chance to tell their story the previous week, give that person time now. Tell the purpose of this second session. In this session we will look at reasons for forgiving and discuss the second step in a method of forgiving.

Close the opening with a prayer.

Scripture: Isaiah 43:25. Read the Scripture together. Discuss what comes to mind from this verse from Isaiah. Questions to ask might include: Does God always forgive? Do you believe that God forgets our sin? When you forgive someone do you forget the offense?

Discussion: Ask the participants to talk about how God forgives us and how we are to forgive others? Are there differences in divine forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness? How seriously do we take the call for us to forgive? Do we sometimes give lip service to Jesus call to forgive?

Discussion: Ask the participants to talk about emotions they have felt when they forgive and emotions they feel when they don't forgive? When they forgive do they have a sense of lightness or peace? When they haven't forgiven and they remember the event do they feel angry again? Are there other emotions involved? Do they believe that God gives us the gift of emotions?

Discussion: The second step is about sharing emotions. Ask each participant to share the emotions that are tied to the story they shared at the last session. Probe a little here about some emotions below the initial emotion. For example, if a person says that they were angry, probe to see if they were angry because they felt betrayed or belittled or some other emotion.

Discussion: Select any questions at the end of the session and discuss.

Closing: Ensure everyone is ok. (Some of the sharing may be emotional.) If necessary, pause and use some silent meditation for a couple of minutes. Ask how the journal entries are going. Remind the participants to write the feelings they have, questions that come to mind, and things they want to share with the group. The journal can be on their computer, handwritten, or just notes on a tablet. Ask everyone to read the material in Session 3 before meeting again. Close with a prayer.

Participant Material

Purpose: In this session we will look at reasons for forgiving and discuss the second step in a method of forgiving.

Isaiah 43:25 “I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.”

As Christians we believe that we worship a loving and forgiving God. We believe that when we sin, we can confess and God will forgive our sin. In the verse from Isaiah we hear that God not only forgives us, but also forgets our sins.

Sometimes we say that what we have done is unforgivable, and we doubt that God has forgiven us. We need to remember that our God has mercy and will forgive us no matter what. God always gives us second chances, and then third chances, fourth chances, and continues to give us chances for as long as we need chances.

Jesus calls us to forgive others as God forgives us. In the Lord's Prayer, we pray, "forgive our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Jesus is telling us that we are expected to forgive because God forgives us, and we are supposed to act as God would act.

Another time Peter asked how many times he should forgive a person. In Jesus' day Jewish law said a person needed to forgive three times. Peter asked if he should forgive seven times; more than double the number of times Jewish law required. Jesus replied that Peter should forgive not seven times, but seventy seven times. We are to forgive many times.

In addition to the theological reasons for forgiving others, there are physical, mental, and psychological reasons to forgive. Only recently has science taken up the challenge of determining if forgiving is good for our health. In one study using functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) people were asked to imagine a hurtful experience they had had. Each person was asked to either forgive the person who had caused the hurt or hold a grudge toward the person. The people who chose forgiveness showed signs in the brain of better mental health than those who held a grudge.

Other studies also show that forgiveness plays a role in physical, mental, and emotional health of individuals and in families, communities and nations. Everett Worthington has developed a scale to measure forgiveness between people. People who showed higher motivations for revenge or avoidance of a person who had hurt them had less relationship satisfaction and less commitment to being in relationship with others and in relationship in a community.

Sometimes we believe as Christians that we aren't supposed to get angry. We are supposed to love one another. Isn't that what Jesus commands us to do? However, when

someone wrongs us, hurts us, or betrays us, we have emotions. Our feelings are involved in the hurts that happen. We may feel anger, betrayal, sadness, hurt, or rage.

But, God created us and we are created in God's image. God created us with emotions. All emotions, both positive and negative, are part of us becoming human. God gave us anger as a gift. However, what God is concerned with is how we use anger. When someone has wronged us, we need to admit to ourselves the emotions we experience. We cannot forgive unless we admit the emotions we have toward that person.

There continue to be studies on how our attitudes and behavior affect areas in our brain that deal with our health. So far all indications show that forgiveness has a positive effect on our health.

Dealing with our health and our emotions is what the second step of the forgiveness process is about. The second step is to name the hurt. This is the step where you move beyond the facts of what happened and express your feelings. We need to give voice to the pain so that forgiveness and healing can begin. Now some might think there is not difference between telling the story and naming the hurt. After all when we tell our story we say that we were hurt. This step asks that you go below saying that you were hurt. What were your emotions? Were you fearful? Did you feel betrayed? Were you hurt because you were angry at what happened to you? Did you feel abandoned or rejected? Were you sad and felt like you had not control over the situation? There are many feelings that are below hurt and pain and this step asked you to go deep and look at the feelings you are experiencing.

Now sometimes it may seem easier or safer to simply dismiss a hurt, stuff it down, rationalize that we shouldn't feel this way, or pretend it didn't happen. The problem is that the

hurt and the pain will not go away unless we name the hurt. Whatever feeling you have is ok. No feeling is wrong.

I've heard people say, "If I don't mention it I don't have to deal with it." Pain and hurt are like grief and loss. We always have to deal with the pain and hurt before we can be healed and become whole again. When we have named our hurts, we move out of pretending that the event never happened or that we don't want to remember the event. In other words we move out of denial. Denial protects us from remembering the pain and the hurt.

In this session we see how we receive forgiveness from God, and how we are expected to forgive others as God has forgiven us. We see that forgiveness benefits us physically, mentally, and emotionally. And we see that it is important to get in touch with our emotions and be able to name those emotions that affect us when we are hurt.

The Definition of Forgiveness

Forgiveness is the elimination of all desire for revenge and personal ill will toward those who have wronged us. Forgiveness is an inner peace of heart and the freedom of not having our lives defined by the injuries we have suffered.

Steps of Forgiveness

Make a decision to forgive, and tell your story.

Name the hurt.

Reach the moment when you have no more desire for revenge.

Decide whether to reconcile with the person who has harmed you or release the relationship.

Questions:

1. Do you believe God always forgives?
2. Do you follow the commandment to forgive others?

3. How do you think the people of Jesus' day reacted to having to forgive many more times than 3? How do you feel about having to forgive many times?
4. Do you notice a change in your emotions whether you forgive or chose not to forgive?
5. What are some of the emotions you typically feel?
6. What are some of the blocks to the feelings you have?
7. Is it difficult to share your emotions with others?

Session 3: How Do We Find Forgiveness?

Leader's Guide

Opening: Begin this third session with checking in with the participants. How did it feel to reflect on forgiveness this last week? Ask if anyone wants to share any reflections they have had. A good question to ask in opening this week is “did anyone find that as they remembered an event that hurt them or made them angry, did they experience the emotion again?” Do not rush the opening. Give time for participants to share.

This session will start with the third step in the method of forgiveness. This step is dependent on a relationship with God so part of the material in this session will be focused on some ways to pray and how God helps with forgiveness. Tell the purpose of this third session. “In this session we will discuss the third step in the method of forgiveness; to reach the moment when the desire for revenge is gone and there is a sense of peace. It is through God’s grace and mercy that we are able to forgive.” Thus, this chapter will look at how we come closer to God to feel forgiveness.

Close the opening with a prayer.

Scripture: Matthew 6:14-15. Read the Scripture together. Discuss what comes to mind from these verses from Matthew. Questions to ask might include: Do you believe these verses? How does the view of God not forgiving us fit with your image of God? Do these verses make you uncomfortable?

Discussion: We can ask one of the questions we might have used before: How seriously do we take the call for us to forgive? Have you thought about praying to God to help with forgiveness? If you have thought about asking God, did you feel you received an answer?

Discussion: Ask the participants to talk about their prayer life. Do you pray regularly? Do they pray more when things are going badly? Do they pray for others? Do they have periods of silence in their prayers? Are there obstacles to praying about forgiving?

Discussion: The third step is about doing the work of forgiving. Ask each participant if they are open to forgiving the person they selected in the first session. If not, what obstacles are keeping them from forgiving? Do they believe that God will be with them if they chose to forgive?

Discussion: Select any questions at the end of the session and discuss.

Closing: Ensure everyone is ok. (Some of the sharing may be emotional.) If necessary, pause and use some silent meditation for a couple of minutes. Ask how the journal entries are going. Remind the participants to write the feelings they have, questions that come to mind, and things they want to share with the group. The journal can be on their computer, handwritten, or just notes on a tablet. Ask everyone to read the material in Session 4 before meeting again. Close with a prayer. This session might be a good time to ask each participant to pray something about forgiveness.

Participant Material

Purpose: In this session we will discuss the third step in the method of forgiveness; to reach the moment when the desire for revenge is gone and there is a sense of peace. It is through God's grace and mercy that we are able to forgive. Thus, this chapter will look at how we come closer to God to feel forgiveness.

Matthew 6:14-15 For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

The third step is to enter the stage of forgiveness where we release the pain and stop desiring revenge. When we make the decision to forgive we can't do it alone. Our forgiving is ultimately a gift of grace from God. God prompts us to receive this divine gift. It is not easy to forgive, and it is with God's help that we can forgive.

The approaches and means of accepting God's help with forgiveness can vary. Prayer is an important part of any variation of this step in the forgiveness method. For some people prayer is not only important, but the heart of the practice of forgiveness. Praying for forgiveness is not about changing what has happened, but about changing our interpretation of the event. Praying for forgiveness is not about asking the other person to apologize, but forgiving that person whether they ask our forgiveness or not.

My prayer for one person who had hurt me was, "God I know you love this person. Please help me see something you love about this person." This prayer was to open my heart to experiencing something other than the hurt I had felt. I had to pray this prayer over a few months before I started to feel a change in my heart. It is rare to pray any prayer about forgiveness and have it work immediately. That doesn't God mean isn't listening. Praying over weeks or months allows us the time we need to make the change we need to make to be able to forgive.

One of the ways God helps us with forgiveness is through other people. A special friend, a family member, or a pastor or counselor may be the person we turn to as a support through this forgiveness process. Support groups are another place where people gather to share their stories

and their struggles. When other people act in conjunction with God to help with forgiveness, the important part is to make the relationship where we are sharing a safe place to share.

Good examples of support groups are grief groups. In grief groups each person tells their story of loss every time the group meets. Telling your story repetitively helps in gaining a new perspective in our grief and loss. Likewise, in the forgiveness process telling your story many times in a safe place allows the pain to lessen. Telling the story and feeling the hurt doesn't happen one time and the process is complete. The reason this is called a process is because it takes repetitive action for a few times or for many times.

For some people it helps to remember how God forgives us and apply that process to people who have hurt us. In the book of Colossians Paul tells us that we need to forgive others as Christ has forgiven us. God is a loving and forgiving God and we are called to share these same characteristics. Additionally, in the Lord's Prayer we ask God to forgive us as we forgive others. The verses at the beginning of this session are the verses immediately following the Lord's Prayer in the gospel of Matthew. These verses tell us that if we want God's forgiveness, then we need to practice our forgiveness of others.

One of the ways we gain understanding through prayer is to let God speak to us. When we pray we need to allow time for some silence. Silence is God's language and it is when we are silent that God can send us a message.

I want to share my method of how I found forgiveness with my parents. First, I prayed many days and months and years. I prayed for understanding. I prayed that I would understand my mother and father and the struggles they faced. I prayed that I would understand the hurts I felt. I prayed I would understand better the anger I was feeling. I prayed that I would understand how God could help me in this process of forgiveness.

As I prayed those many months I noticed that my anger began to turn to sadness. I was sad that my dad was a victim of the disease of alcoholism. Alcoholism is as much of a disease as cancer. I was sad that my dad could not get help with the disease. I was sad for my mother. I was sad because she had a love hate relationship with my dad and rather than confront my dad directly, it was easier to take out the anger she felt on me, a child. I was sad because if she had lived a generation later she might have gotten help through counseling. In my sadness I realized that I had compassion for my parents. I realized that they were doing the best job they could do. I realized that I had begun the long process of forgiving and healing.

Our forgiving is ultimately a gift of grace from God. God prompts us to receive this divine gift. We set out on a journey of the heart toward forgiveness with God. We can't do it alone. God always journeys with us on the process of forgiveness. Receiving this gift allows us to free ourselves from the pain and the anger and grow in our love and compassion for others.

As we allow God to work through us, we need to remember that forgiveness is not a quick fix. Forgiving can take weeks or months or even years. Over time we notice the change in how we are telling the story of our hurt. And once we have forgiven, we have a new story to tell. The facts of the hurt we experienced haven't changed, but our interpretation has changed. The story will almost always now include something about the story of the person who hurt us. We can tell the new story because we have released the pain of the hurt of the past.

As we work through this step, we may find ourselves telling our story again and naming or even experiencing our emotions again. This step in particular is not a step that can be done once and finished. The good news is that God will work with us as long as it takes.

The Definition of Forgiveness

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Steps of Forgiveness

Make a decision to forgive, and tell your story.

Name the hurt.

Reach the moment when you have no more desire for revenge.

Decide whether to reconcile with the person who has harmed you or release the relationship.

Questions:

1. How do you pray? Have you tried writing your prayers, praying out loud, meditating without words?
2. Do you feel that God listens to your prayers? Answers your prayers?
3. If you have tried to forgive someone, have you felt God in the process of forgiving?
4. Forgiveness can take weeks or months. Is knowing that God is involved consistent with the process taking a long time?
5. How has God helped you with forgiveness?

Session 4: Should We Reconcile?

Leader Guide

Opening: Begin this fourth session with checking in with the participants. How did it feel to reflect on forgiveness this last week? Ask if anyone wants to share any reflections they have had. Good questions to ask in opening this week are: “did anyone find new ways to pray about forgiveness? Did anyone experience something new about the event or the person they are remembering? Do not rush the opening. Give time for participants to share.

This session will start with the fourth step in the method of forgiveness. Tell the purpose of this fourth session. “In this session we will discuss the fourth step in the method of forgiveness; whether to reconcile after we have forgiven or to end the relationship after forgiving. We will also look at the implications of forgiveness on the community.”

Close the opening with a prayer.

Scripture: Luke 7:41-43; 47. Read the Scripture together. Discuss what comes to mind from these verses from Luke. Questions to ask might include: What do you think of the generosity of the creditor? These verses seem to imply that the more you are forgiven the more you love. Do you agree with that concept?

Discussion: Ask the participants if they can think of a time when forgiveness affected more than the two people directly involved? If they are willing can they describe the situation? What do they think of Paul’s words to the communities in the New Testament?

Discussion: Ask the participants if they know of any moments in their churches where conflict happened and forgiveness occurred or no forgiveness was given. If they are willing ask them to share their experiences. Suggestion: Obtain a copy of the DVD *The Power of Forgiveness* directed by Martin Dobbmeier and show the DVD. (New York, New York: First Run Features, 2017.)

Discussion: The fourth step is about deciding to reconcile or to end the relationship. Ask each participant how they are doing with forgiveness with the person they selected in session one. If they have forgiven will they restore the relationship or will they end the relationship? What are the reasons for reconciling or ending the relationship? Pause and have some discussion around reconciling and ending relationships.

Discussion: Select any questions at the end of the session and discuss.

Closing: Ensure everyone is ok. (Some of the sharing may be emotional.) If necessary, pause and use some silent meditation for a couple of minutes. Ask how the journal entries are going. Remind the participants to write the feelings they have, questions that come to mind, and things they want to share with the group. The journal can be on their computer, handwritten, or just notes on a tablet. Ask everyone to read the material in Session 5 before meeting again. Close with a prayer. This session might be a good time to ask each participant to pray something about forgiveness.

NOTE: The next session is the last session. I encourage a ritual to be used to end the last session. One ritual might be to bring candles and have each participant light a candle and say a prayer for the people they have forgiven. Each participant might also take the opportunity to share something they have learned about forgiveness. Another ritual might be to give each participant a shell, or a special stone, or some other object to carry with them to remind them of forgiving others. If the group has formed a bond through these sessions, one idea might be to meet once a month for the next few months to discuss how forgiveness is going.

Participant Material

Purpose: In this session we will discuss the fourth step in the method of forgiveness; whether to reconcile after we have forgiven or to end the relationship after forgiving. We will also look at the implications of forgiveness on the community.

Luke 7:41-43; 47. “A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?” Simon answered, “I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt.” And Jesus said to him, “You have judged rightly.” Therefore, I tell you, his sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence he has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.”

Up to now we have been looking at forgiveness as an event between two people. However, in almost every case the event that needs forgiveness involves more than just two people. If a dispute happens between two family members other members of the family are indirectly involved.

I remember when my mother and my aunt had an argument about a family reunion. My aunt thought my parents were spending the night at her house. My mother had made a hotel reservation. When my parents arrived at the reunion and my aunt found out my parents were staying in a hotel instead of with her, an argument broke out. My mother and my aunt never spoke to one another again. I and other members of the family had difficulty in communicating with both my aunt and my mother. We were supposed to take sides and either support either my mother or my aunt.

This chapter goes beyond interpersonal forgiveness and looks at some of the impact on other people, our communities, our nations, and the world. The importance of forgiveness for communities, nations, and the global people should not be minimized. Communities may be our local churches, geographic neighbors, and communities formed around an interest. Communities hold common values and usually support one another in times of need.

The idea of forgiveness within community goes back centuries. In the New Testament Paul writes letters to several communities. Paul was concerned with how the people in the communities treated each other behaviorally. While Paul doesn't give any extended treatment of forgiveness, he does write to communities about forgiveness. To the Corinthians he writes that they should forgive the one who has caused pain to the community. If the community forgives the offender, Paul will forgive the person for the sake of the community and the sake of Christ.¹⁵⁴

To the Ephesians Paul says that the community should put away slander, wrath, and anger and instead be tenderhearted, kind, and forgive one another.¹⁵⁵ For Paul the harmony of the community is dependent of forgiveness among other things.

Do some research on communities where violence has created hatred between two groups. Some suggestions might be Northern Ireland, the Amish after the school shooting, the Parkland, Florida school shooting, Pittsburgh and the shooting in the synagogue. Reflect on whether forgiveness was offered to the perpetrator and the difference that made in the community. (In Northern Ireland the result of violence has led to the continued separation of the Protestant and Catholic communities. In the Amish Community forgiveness is a fabric of the society and the result is the Amish visited the shooter's family to say the Amish forgave the shooter.)

¹⁵⁴ 2 Corinthians 2:7-10 (NRSV).

¹⁵⁵ Ephesians 4:31-32 (NRSV).

Henri Nouwen reminds us about forgiveness in the broader community. “There is so much forgiving to do. We have to forgive our parents for not being able to give us unconditional love, our brothers and sisters for not giving us the support we dreamed about, our friends for not being there for us when we expected them. We have to forgive our church and civil leaders for their ambitions and manipulations. Beyond all that we have to forgive all those who torture, kill, rape, destroy – who make the world such a dark place.”¹⁵⁶

In addition to the other people indirectly involved in the event that hurt us, another impact of forgiveness on our community is the way the justice system works. In most cases when an event happens that affects a community the cry for justice is heard more frequently than the call for forgiveness. Justice and forgiveness are not mutually exclusive. Justice and forgiveness can both be experienced.

In this country the justice system is primarily based on retribution. However, in the last two decades there is an interest in restorative justice where the focus is on healing the victim, the offender, and having involvement from the community. When the justice system becomes more restorative, forgiveness is part of the process and in the community reconciliation is important.

A specific example of forgiveness being part of the justice process and the community being involved is the “Sentencing Circle,” used by some Native peoples. The goal of the Sentencing Circle is to restore harmony which would result from changes to multiple people within the community. People gather in this sentencing circle who have a role in the crime that has been committed. The people include the person who is the offender, the victim of the disruption, and representatives of the community. Everyone acknowledges that there has been a disruption and each person speaks from their perspective. The sentencing plan involves

¹⁵⁶ Nouwen, *The Only Necessary Thing*, 153.

commitments by the offender and by people within the community. The offender is forgiven by committing to some changes in behavior.¹⁵⁷

As criminal justice systems move toward rehabilitation and take into account the victim's perspective, the justice system moves toward a culture of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a way to end a violent cycle and find a way to peace within a community and the broader world.

The fourth and final step in forgiveness is another choice. We must decide whether to reconcile with the person who has harmed us or to release the relationship. It is important that this step of reconciliation or release is only after we have forgiven.

After the hurt if we just avoid the person we might want to think that we are releasing the relationship, but avoiding the person is not releasing the relationship. If we avoid the person, we are pretending the hurt didn't happen. It is only after going through the process of forgiving that we can make the choice to reconcile or release thoughtfully.

Our relationship with God is always one of forgiving and reconciling. Our relationship with others may or may not call for reconciliation. Trust is an important factor in whether or not the relationship can be restored. For example, in the case of domestic abuse, it takes strength to forgive, but most times it is likely not wise to stay in the relationship. In the case of parents and children efforts might be worthwhile to restore the relationship.

When a person hurts you, the relationship between you and the person who hurt you changes based on that hurt. It is important to acknowledge that the relationship has changed, and decide whether to forgive the person. If you decide to forgive, and after you have forgiven, then decide whether to reconcile the relationship or to end the relationship.

¹⁵⁷ Hadley, *The Spiritual Roots of Restorative Justice*, 70.

The Definition of Forgiveness

Forgiveness is the elimination of all desire for revenge and personal ill will toward those who have wronged us. Forgiveness is an inner peace of heart and the freedom of not having our lives defined by the injuries we have suffered.

Steps of Forgiveness

Make a decision to forgive, and tell your story.

Name the hurt.

Reach the moment when you have no more desire for revenge.

Decide whether to reconcile with the person who has harmed you or release the relationship.

Questions

1. Have you ever experienced a conflict and felt caught in the middle? Was there any forgiveness on either side of the conflict?
2. Name two or three communities that you belong to. How have those communities dealt with conflict?
3. The Amish teach forgiveness by example. They visited the family of the man who killed five young girls and offered forgiveness. Would that be possible for you?
4. Who does your lack of forgiveness affect?
5. What is your view of justice? Does forgiveness have a place in your view of justice?

Session 5: How Do We Forgive Ourselves?

Leader Guide

Opening: Begin this fifth and last session with checking in with the participants. How did it feel to reflect on forgiveness this last week? Ask if anyone wants to share any reflections they have had. Good questions to ask in opening this week are “after discussing the impact on communities did you observe any community dynamics this past week?” “Did you reflect on whether you are going to reconcile or end a relationship?” “Are there any questions about reconciling or ending the relationship?”

This session is the last session so you can announce that at the end of the session we will use a ritual to close this session. Tell the purpose of this fifth session. “In this session we will discuss self-forgiveness including the reasons for forgiving ourselves and the obstacles we have to forgiving ourselves.”

Close the opening with a prayer.

Scripture: 1 Peter 5:6-7. Read the Scripture together. Discuss what comes to mind from these verses from in 1 Peter. Questions to ask might include: What does it mean to humble ourselves before God? Sometimes we say that God cares for us, but if we are honest, we have trouble believing that God cares for us. What obstacles have you heard about believing that God cares for us.

Discussion: What are the obstacles to forgiving ourselves? Sometimes we are told it is selfish to think about ourselves. How does this belief affect our need to forgive ourselves? Do you feel God has forgiven you?

Discussion: Are you familiar with the concepts of guilt and shame? What is your experience with guilt and shame?

Discussion: Select any questions at the end of the session and discuss.

Closing: This is the last session. Spend a few minutes asking what the participants learned about forgiveness. Close with a ritual.

One ritual might be to bring candles and have each participant light a candle and say a prayer for the people they have forgiven. Each participant might also take the opportunity to share something they have learned about forgiveness. Another ritual might be to give each participant a shell, or a special stone, or some other object to carry with them to remind them of forgiving others. If the group has formed a bond through these sessions, one idea might be to meet once a month for the next few months to discuss how forgiveness is going.

Participant Material

Purpose: In this session we will discuss self-forgiveness including the reasons for forgiving ourselves and the obstacles we have to forgiving ourselves.

1 Peter 5:6-7 Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.

Adam Hamilton tells the story of one person in his congregation talking about forgiveness, “I struggle almost daily. I can see how God works in other’s lives, but in my own, I struggle. I know that God loves me no matter what I’ve done or been in my life, but to really feel it at the core of my being, I struggle”¹⁵⁸

This person speaks for many of us who struggle with forgiving ourselves. If we have trouble believing that God forgives us, how can we possibly forgive ourselves? And even when

¹⁵⁸ Hamilton, *Forgiveness*, 22.

we believe that God has forgiven us, we still struggle with how we could forgive ourselves. We have high expectations of ourselves and we don't feel we should make a mistake. We play the "if only" script in our heads. If only I had not yelled at that person, if only I had been paying attention when I was driving, if only... and you can fill in the rest of the sentence.

These high expectations lead us to believe there are times when we don't feel we deserve to be forgiven. In many cases we forgive another person for the hurt we feel, and we still can't forgive ourselves for the part we played in the event.

Dick Tibbits says that forgiving ourselves is essential. "Suicide, eating disorders, substance abuse, and depression all are linked to the inability to forgive oneself."¹⁵⁹ The reasons for forgiving ourselves are to avoid the physical and mental problems stated by Dick Tibbits, and also to release us from the hurts and wounds of the past.

When we speak of forgiving ourselves, there are two terms that are important to understand. These two terms are guilt and shame. Guilt is feeling bad about something we did. There is legitimate guilt because of something we said or did to hurt another person. We feel guilty because of that word we said to a close family member. If we could take it back we would. We feel guilty because some act we did that hurt another person.

We may also feel guilty because of learning family and cultural norms that we are supposed to feel guilty. A family member tells us that we should have acted a certain way and that we are guilty because we didn't act that way. For example, a woman told me she feels guilty because she believes that she should visit her sister more frequently. A therapist that I was using many years ago told me that no one can make us feel guilty. Feeling guilty is something

¹⁵⁹ Tibbits, *Forgive to Live*, 187.

we do to ourselves. We feel guilty because of listening to someone else instead of trusting ourselves.

Shame is feeling bad about who we are. We turn guilt for an action into shame about who we are. For example, if we fail a test in school we tell ourselves that it is because we are stupid. If we become angry and lash out at someone, it is because we are a cold and unkind person.

I have mentioned that my dad was alcoholic and in my case like many other homes with an alcoholic person, a shame based system is created in the family. For many years I felt the problem was about who I was. I heard messages about how selfish I was, about how unlikeable I was, and about how I didn't deserve anything good happening.

I learned as an adult that I was experiencing shame. I learned that we all are children of God and we all deserve dignity and respect. Every one of us is a loving, kind, and compassionate person at our core. Therefore, we deserve to be forgiven and we deserve to forgive ourselves.

To repeat the definition of forgiveness furthers our look at self-forgiveness. *Forgiveness is the elimination of all desire for revenge and personal ill will toward those who have wronged us. Forgiveness is an inner peace of heart and the freedom of not having our lives defined by the injuries we have suffered.*

In the case of self-forgiveness we are harming ourselves by holding onto the guilt, whether legitimate or not, or blaming ourselves for who we are. Choosing to forgive ourselves and going through the process of forgiveness is how we free ourselves from the hurt and from the past. We release the pain we are feeling. If we are guilty of something we said or did, we can acknowledge the mistake we made, learn from the mistake, and move on.

Forgiving ourselves is how we heal and grow. As we process what has happened and name the emotions that we are having, we can share with ourselves and with God. God allows us to remember the past, but not be captive to the past.

Self-forgiveness requires absolute truth. We face the wrongs we have done and we admit that we are flawed individuals in need of forgiveness. Self-forgiveness requires humility and hard work. It is with humility that we admit we are not perfect and that sometimes we set our standards for perfection.

The process of self-forgiveness is the same as the process for interpersonal forgiveness and can take weeks, or months, or years to complete. It requires the desire not to repeat the behavior and a desire to change. Self-forgiveness requires having love and compassion for ourselves. Self-forgiveness is true self-acceptance of who we are.

Forgiving ourselves is how we make meaning out of our suffering, restore our self-esteem, and tell a new story of who we are. By telling our story and naming our emotions we understand the event and the meaning we have previously assigned to the event. As we forgive ourselves, we have internal peace and a new interpretation of the event and its meaning. The process of self-forgiveness leads to internal peace. Forgiveness is something you do for yourself.

Fred Luskin says, “When you forgive yourself, you look for your good qualities, appreciate the love you offer, and accept the humility, the harm you cause.”¹⁶⁰

Self-forgiveness is true self-acceptance. Forgiveness is not easy and takes effort, but choosing to forgive heals our wounds, helps us to grow, and assures us that we are following what Jesus asks of us. We don’t forgive once and then never have to forgive again. Forgiveness is a

¹⁶⁰ Luskin, *Forgive for Love*, 210.

way of life, and with each event that we forgive, we become more compassionate to ourselves and we become more compassionate to others.

We close this study with knowing how important forgiveness is. We forgive others. We forgive ourselves. And we forgive each time we feel hurt or anger over some behavior. I invite you to choose today to start forgiving.

The Definition of Forgiveness

Forgiveness is the elimination of all desire for revenge and personal ill will toward those who have wronged us. Forgiveness is an inner peace of heart and the freedom of not having our lives defined by the injuries we have suffered.

Steps of Forgiveness

Make a decision to forgive, and tell your story.

Name the hurt.

Reach the moment when you have no more desire for revenge.

Decide whether to reconcile with the person who has harmed you or release the relationship.

Questions

1. Do you have problems forgiving yourself?
2. Do you remember what you have learned about self-forgiveness?
3. Think about the times you have felt guilty. Is your feeling legitimate or not?
4. This is the last session. What have you learned about forgiveness?

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